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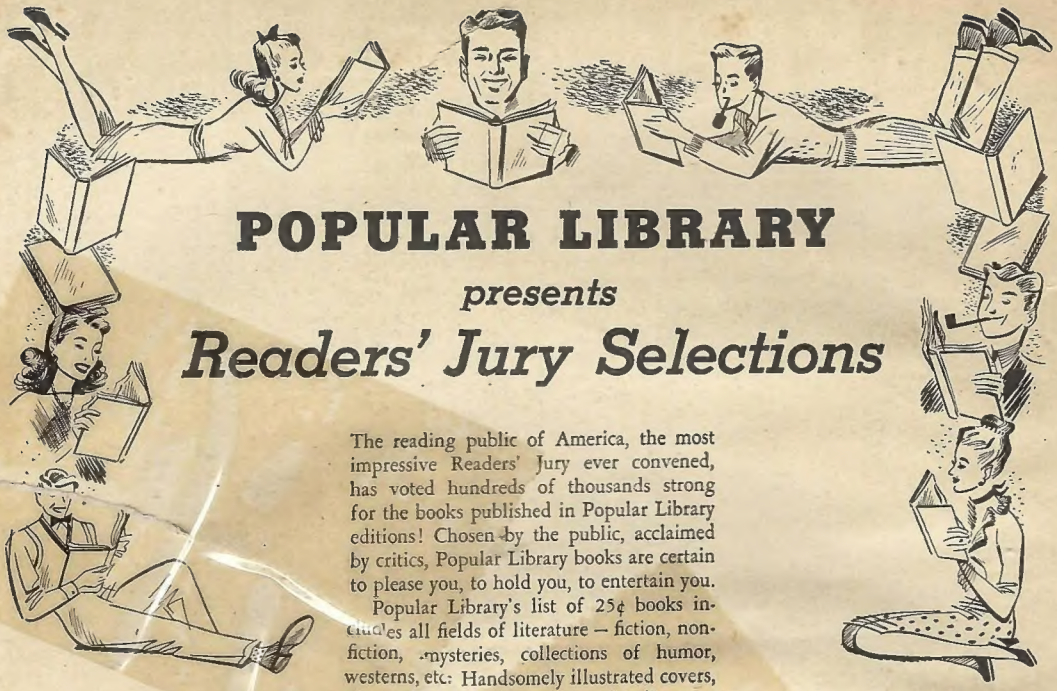

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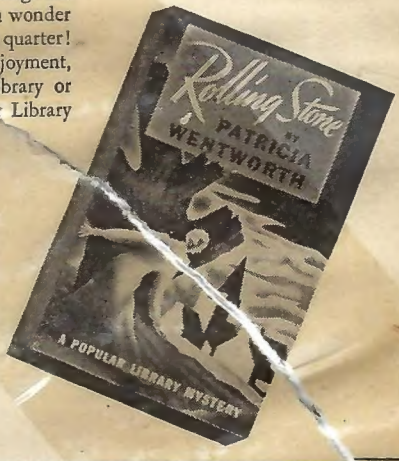

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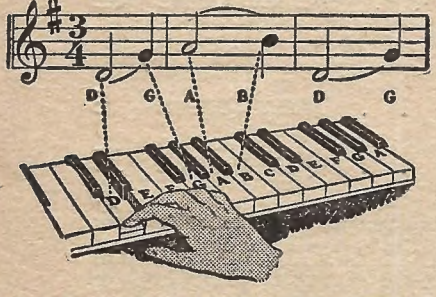

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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3 *A THRILLING PUBLICATION* August, 1946

A Complete El Halcon Novel

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By BRADFORD SCOTT

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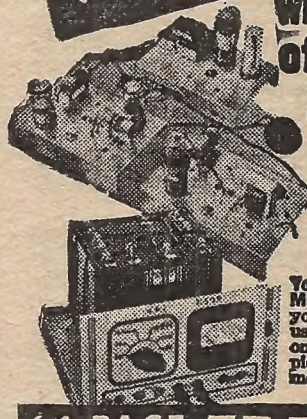

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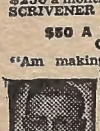

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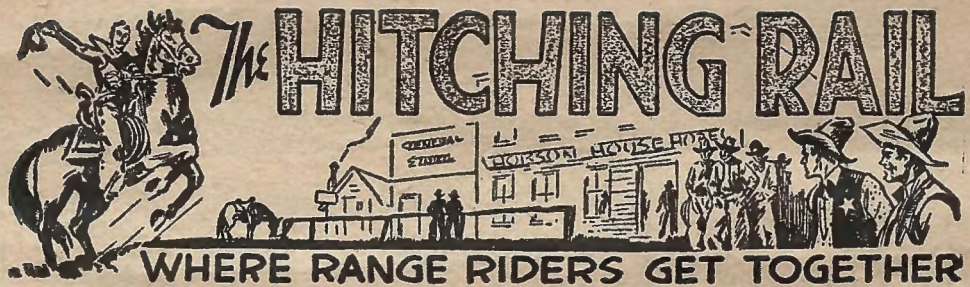

HOLA, ever'body! You're sure welcome back to the old Hitchin' Rail again for another handshake and range powwow. Yessir, here's Jessie and Wade Small gettin' ready to hop in their old jaloppy and get rollin' West, they say. I reckon it's sure swell to have yore girl at yore side, and a long trip all mapped out before you.

The Smalls are aimin' on travelin' out to Arizona where they've bought theirselves a little ranch in them beautiful old Chiricahua Mountains, commonly called the "Cherry Cows."

Wade aims to get plenty o' good health and strength after his long set-to with the Japs and malaria fever in the South Pacific.

Them Little Prairie Dogs

Betcha, you'll see them little prairie dogs you've been hearin' about, Jessie. But they're not genuwine dogs, as you're a-thinkin', girl. The little animal is called "Prairie Dog" because its home is the prairie, and because it makes a peculiar little sound, like the sharp bark of a pup.

It belongs to the order o' gnawin' animals, and is a true marmot, same as the woodchuck and ground squirrel.

No, Jessie, you don't eat 'em, not unless you gets mighty doggoned hungry. White folks don't like 'em, but the Injuns eat 'em sometimes.

You'll pass whole "towns" o' prairie dogs on your way out West and, like as not, you'll have 'em for neighbors on that little ranch o' yours.

As Cute as Puppies

How do they look? Well, durned if they ain't cute as speckled puppies. They look like little fat squirrels. Don't reckon anybody ever saw one that wasn't plump as butter. The color o' their hair is pale chestnut, lighter next to the skin. They're from fourteen to seventeen inches in length, and weigh from one to more'n three pounds.

When you see the countryside dotted with little hillocks, a plump little squirrel-like animal or two seated upon each hillock watching you curiously as you approach, you know you've hit a prairie dog town, Jessie.

As you draw near you'll see the little animal pop into his hillock with lightnin' speed. When he thinks you've gone he'll emerge again, and watch you out o' sight. They've got plenty o' curiosity, lemme tell you. They sit on their little hind quarters, gnawing, squirrel fashion, their bright eyes lookin' everywhere.

Cowboys Don't Like 'Em

But does the rancher and the cowboy think the prairie dog is cute? Not on yore tintype, never. Many a good horse has broke his leg in a prairie dog hole. No cowboy wants to feel when he lets his bronc out, goin' hell-for-leather after a calf, that the bronc's gonna step in a prairie dog hole and go down with a splintered leg, maybe, the rider sailin' over his head to break a few bones o' his own.

Nope, that ain't a popular sport. Ranchers make war on prairie dogs, and with good reason.

Why, in western Texas one continuous colony is about 250 miles long and 100 miles wide, and in eastern Arizona there's a square mile that contains, by actual count, 7,200 burrows.

These prairie dog towns are sure plumb ingenious, if you take the trouble to dig down to investigate. The hillocks are entrances to burrows which extend sharply down into the ground, sometimes a dozen feet or more. They form a secure shelter to keep out the water in a heavy rain.

From the bottoms o' the deep shafts ex-

(Continued on page 90)

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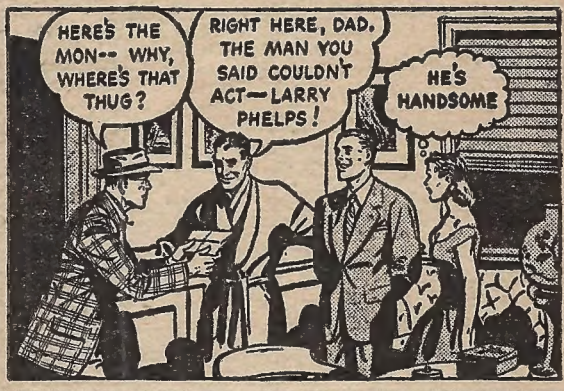

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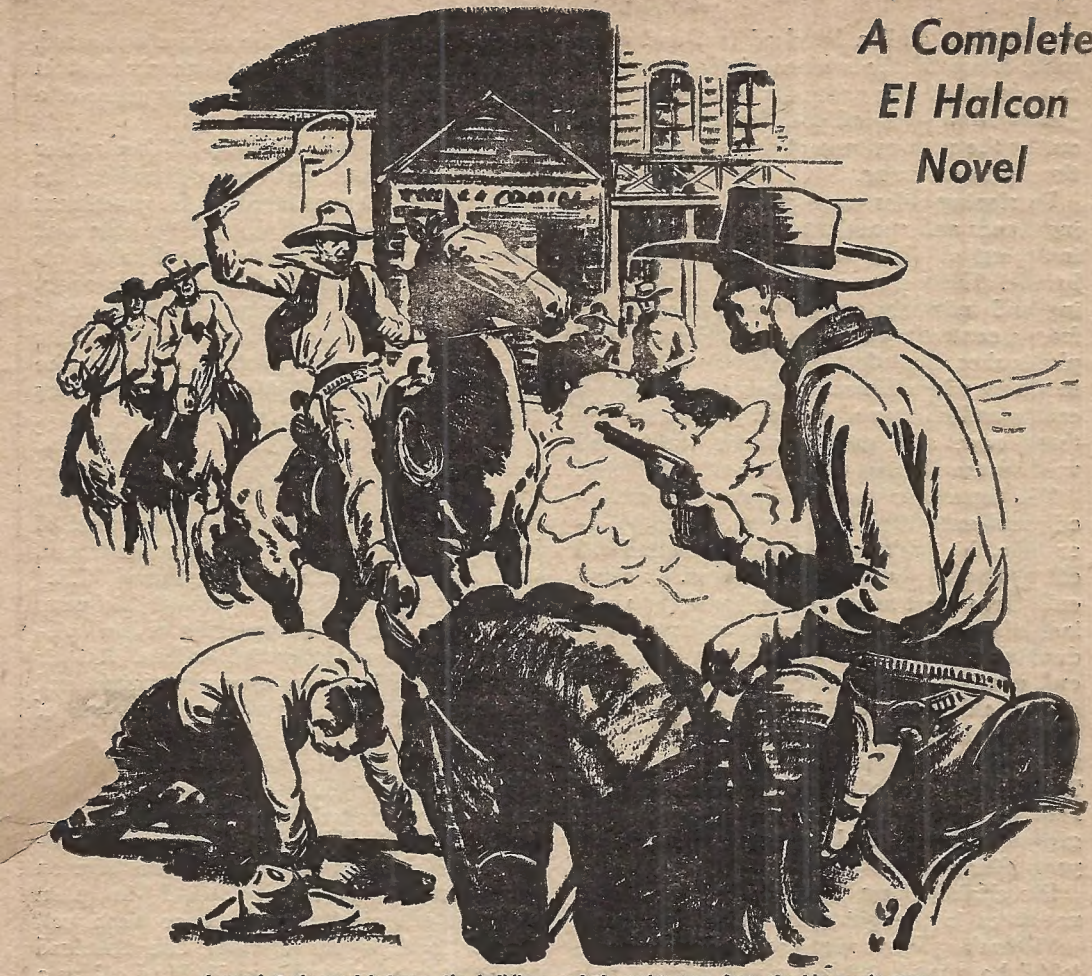

A gunshot slammed between the buildings and the quirt spun from the big man's grasp

THE DESERT MYSTERY

By BRADFORD SCOTT

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CHAPTER I

The Lost Trail

WALT SLADE, he whom the peons of the River Villages named *El Halcon*—the Hawk—sat his magnificent black horse and stared at the great depression that cut at right-angles the trail he was riding.

"Shadow," he muttered, "that's the biggest one I ever saw!"

From east to west it flowed, writhing up the sags, dipping down the opposite slopes, crossing the swales, swelling out of the sunrise, vanishing into the mystery of the west-

ern skyline. Full a hundred feet and more wide, it scored the surface of the rangeland to a depth of two yards, its bottom sparsely grass-grown, studded with boulders scoured out by the rushing torrent that filled it in the time of heavy rains.

Its sloping sides were grown with flowering weeds and succulent grama grass, seemingly out of place here in the Texas Panhandle. There were ocotillos with tall, curving and infinitely graceful wands springing from a central root. Green and yellow mescal plants shot thirty feet into the air to explode in starry white blooms. There were tufts of cactus and clumps of dagger. With here and there raw, red gashes where water had washed the sloping earth free of vegetation.

The depression was like a great and crooked canal excavated by some eccentric builder who, his task completed, had wandered off, neglecting to fill it with water. It could only have been made, Slade knew, by myriads of pounding hoofs passing and repassing during an untold number of years, hollowing out, beating down and compacting the soil.

"An old bison trail," he told his horse. "The herds used to drift from one grassland to another and back again, over and over. They'd graze a section bare, then move on to another, coming back when the grass had grown up again, and repeating the process year after year."

His slightly long, black-lashed gray eyes narrowed in thought as he gazed westward.

"There's a desert over there, or so we were told," he mused. "What would bison herds trek to a desert for? They wouldn't leave good grass to cross it. Mebbe it wasn't always a desert, though."

Meditatively, he glanced at the sun climbing the eastern sky.

"Accordin' to the information we got yesterday, it ain't much more'n twenty miles to that town of Griffin we're headin' for, feller," he said to Shadow, the great black horse. "We got time to make it, and to spare, before dark. S'pose we just amble along this big ditch for a spell and see where it gets itself to. I'm sort of curious. Mebbe it'll turn north or south a mite further along."

SHADOW offered no objection and Slade, shifting his small guitar in its waterproof case to a more comfortable position across his broad shoulders, where it hung by a silken thong, sent the black scrambling down the trail to the bottom of the bison track. Here he turned the cayuse westward, his tall form, much more than six feet in height, lounging with the careless grace of a lifetime in the saddle.

A smile quirked the lips of his rather wide mouth and relieved somewhat the tinge of fierceness evinced in the prominent hawk nose above and the jutting chin and lean, powerful jaw below. He hitched his double cartridge belts a little higher about his sinewy waist, his slim, deeply bronzed hands seeming never far from the black butts of the heavy guns protruding from the carefully worked and oiled cut-out holsters sagging against his muscular thighs.

Slade's soft gray shirt, faded overalls, and batwing chaps were sifted with the dust of long and hard riding. There was dust even on the gaily colored silken handkerchief looped carelessly about his bronzed throat, in the dimples of his broad-brimmed "J.B." that was pushed back to reveal his crisp black hair, and in the wrinkles of his well-worn boots of softly tanned leather. But his laughing, reckless gray eyes were bright and his lean, bronzed face showed no lines of fatigue.

Shadow likewise was dusty and travel-stained, but his eyes were also bright and his ears alertly pricked, despite a long night of trail pounding. The miles flowed easily beneath his dainty hoofs until, more than an hour later, Slade abruptly reined him in on the crest of a rise over which the bison trail dipped to flow for another five hundred yards and end abruptly as if sliced off by a giant knife. Slade's lips pursed in a soundless whistle.

Far westward, many, many miles distant, a blue shadow against the paler blue of the sky, was a range of mountains, the flat-topped mountains of New Mexico. But between where Slade sat his horse and that cool shadow in the sky was a vast arid expanse, fanged by chimney rocks and grotesquely carved buttes, swelling in long ridges, pocked by deep hollows, shimmering whitely in the sunlight, over its surface weaving and writhing heat devils like cosmic dancers.

A desert of white sands, seemingly illimitable in extent, grim, sinister and terrible. And at its hithermost lip, the bison trail ended.

Here appeared to be the outpost of the fertile rangeland, and at first glance it would seem difficult to say to just what natural

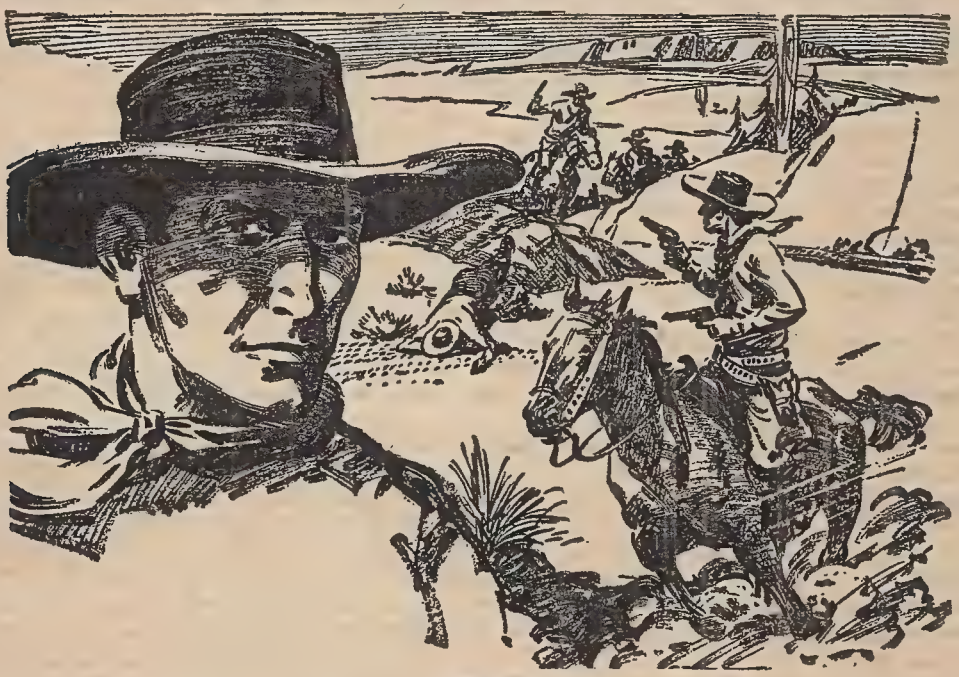
causes such an abrupt change in the character of the soil was due. But Walt Slade who, before the murder of his father by wideloopers had sent him to riding the dim and furtive trails of outlaw land, had had three years in a famous college of engineering, surveyed the terrain with the understanding of a geologist.

His mind's eye looked back over the endless years of the past and rested upon a scene strangely at variance with that which encountered his physical vision of the present. Instead of the stony slopes that rolled down to the desert's lip, he saw great, reed-grown, steaming flats and marshes, upon which flapped and writhed and wallowed mighty, grotesque forms of life, browsing on the lush and succulent vegetation, tearing at one another with fearful fang and claw, bellowing, snorting, beating to foam the blue waters that lapped the marshy shore, and staining it with their blood.

He saw the mountains to the north and west rent by terrific catacylsms, saw the waters gradually recede, the monstrous life forms give way to others which were replaced once again by still other and smaller forms. With ever the great primeval ocean dwindling as the terrestrial heavings and shatterings diverted the streams that flowed into it and damned its outlets.

The vivid blue of the strange inland sea changed to dusty gray, to lifeless black. The encroaching shores gleamed whitely with salt deposits, the lake became only a great pond, a pool, a shallow marsh, and vanished. The sunlight no longer beat upon wide reaches of deepest azure, but reflected back from a billowing expanse of deathly white. And the bison came no more.

"They trailed here to get water and grow fat on the rank grasses that fringed the lake," he mused. "But when the lake dried up, there was nothin' to bring 'em."



WALT SLADE

LOUNGING comfortably in his saddle, one sinewy leg hooked over the horn, Slade rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand and lighted it. As he smoked he mused on this creeping tragedy of the dead years. The sun climbed higher, and as its glistening beams beat more strongly on the white sands, he was suddenly entertained by nature's most wonderful picture show, a desert mirage.

High in the sky, riding down the path of the winds, appeared a horseman, gigantic, distorted. Slade could see him bend low in his saddle, glance over his shoulder from time to time. Soundlessly the hoofs of his mount drummed the sky trail. And abruptly

over the rim of the skyline appeared other horsemen, a full half-dozen of them, riding swiftly in pursuit. From their ranks mushroomed whitish puffs.

Rigid with suspense, his nails biting into his sweating palms, *El Halcon* watched the silent drama unfolding in the golden air. He saw the fleeing horseman throw up his arms, reel from his saddle and fall into limitless space. And as if his fall had snapped the cords that held in place the reflecting sky screen, the whole scene vanished and only the limitless expanse of sun-drenched blue remained.

Slade's tense muscles relaxed, leaving him quivering as from mighty physical effort. His eyes were coldly gray, his face bleak. For *El Halcon* knew that what he had just witnessed was no figment of over-wrought imagination, no fantasy of sun and air and shifting winds. Somewhere over there beyond the edge of the world, beating the sands with their horses' hoofs, rode fleshly counterparts of the ghostly horsemen who had slain a fleeing shadow with a shadowy bullet.

Down there on the sands the fugitive had been a living, breathing man. The bullet that had struck him down was sound and solid. The desert rocks had reverberated to the roar of guns. Those whitish puffs had wreathed and drifted in the hot air. Even now, doubtless, the slayers were grouped about the body of their victim.

For Slade knew well that such a mirage is but the reflection on the mirror of the sky of actual happenings on the ground below, distorted as to detail, but undeviatingly true in essentials.

"It was a killing, all right," Slade told his horse. "But what was it all about? A sheriff's posse runnin' down some hellion? Mebbe, but mebbe not. Pore devil never had a chance, that's shore. Wonder just where it happened? No way to tell that, though. Might be thirty miles away, might be seventy."

For long *El Halcon* sat his bronc and pondered the freakish twist of nature that made the mirage possible. He might not have been the only person who had seen the sky-reflection of the chase and the shooting.

He stood up in the stirrups, searching the distances with his keen eyes, but there was no sign of rider or trudging miner with pack burro. The entire world was empty. There was no jury to the killing.

CHAPTER II

Desert "Blackboard"

MOVED by a restless curiosity, Slade rode down the rocky slope to the desert's edge, and out upon the billowing expanse.

"Whew!" he breathed as clouds of choking dust, kicked up by Shadow's laboring irons, seethed about him.

The black sank almost knee-deep into the powdery surface and almost instantly his progress was slowed to a straining shamble. Only a few yards from the desert's lip, the heat sensibly increased, and the salty dust stung Slade's nostrils and choked his throat. Shadow sneezed prodigiously, and gave a snort of relief as Slade pulled him to a halt.

"Enough of that!" the Hawk muttered, and turned Shadow's head back east again.

Then, at the edge of the sands, he once more pulled the black to an abrupt halt.

Set in the ground at the very edge of the desert was a peculiar object. It was the bleached shoulder blade of a giant bison, an enormous, fan-shaped bone fourteen to sixteen inches long, ten inches wide at one end and two inches at the other. On the smooth face of this white "blackboard" of the plains were drawings in yellow, green and red.

Near the left edge of the bone two crude figures representing men were squatted beside a fire over which hung a kettle. Riding toward the camp was a single horseman. Above the figures was drawn an arrow that pointed toward what looked like a huge rock building jutting up from a smooth surface that sketchily represented the desert.

Slade was familiar with such signboards. He knew that the Indians used them to direct companions to a certain locality or to inform followers where they could be found.

There was nothing unusual about the object. Slade had seen many of them. But the pigments with which the figures had been drawn were fresh and, unlike the bone itself, not weathered in the least.

"Now what in blazes does this mean?" the Hawk demanded of his horse. "There haven't been any Indians runnin' loose in this section for gosh knows how long, not since Iron-hand Arlington cleaned 'em up, years and years ago. Wonder if it's some wandering cowpoke's notion of a joke?"

High in the sky, in the desert mirage appeared a fleeing horseman, with others swiftly in pursuit

He dismounted, and examined the signboard more closely. Yes, the pigments smeared on the bone were green, the outer surface gummed over by the heat, the paint beneath still fairly liquid.

"This thing was painted only a day or two ago," he mused.

Raising his eyes, he stared across the deathly surface of the desert, then dropped them to the blade bone again, the concentration furrow deepening between his black brows.

He felt that the thing carried a definite message of some kind. But it was an enigmatical message not to be read by the chance observer. The key to the whole drawing, he felt, was the arrow that pointed toward what was apparently a building out there on the arid sands.

"More likely to be a rock formation of some kind," he muttered, staring at the grim-looking structure. "Those two gents have evidently made a camp out there, and that block of rock has somethin' to do with it, and whoever smeared this bone is tryin' to tell somebody else somethin' about it. But why in blazes would anybody want to get out there, anyhow? I've got a mighty good notion that if a jigger tried to cross to the mountains he'd end up findin' hisself dead of thirst and salt dust before he was half-way across, even if he had skins to carry water in. A hoss can't make a mile an hour through that powdery sand, and the heat out there must be somethin' awful.

"But," he added thoughtfully, "there *are* gents out there somewheres. That mirage proved that. Mebbe there's an easier way to get across. But if there is, why the signboard right here where the bison track ends? Well, there's no use puzzlin' my hat rack over it. Come on, feller. Let's head for town. I'm thirsty, and plenty hungry, and I've a notion you are, too."

Turning his back on the bone, he forked Shadow and sent him eastward along the bison track. More than once, however, he turned in his saddle and stared thoughtfully back toward the sinister desolation and the blue shadow of mountains shouldering against the western sky.

HAD it not been for the grim tragedy the mirage had mirrored in the golden air, Slade would have given the Indian signboard little thought. But he felt there was a definite tie-up between the two.

Well, the solution of the mystery could wait. A hefty drink and plenty of food were the imperative needs at the moment. As he rode, however, he wondered if what he had witnessed could be connected with the mission that had brought him into the Panhandle country.

Reaching the trail that crossed the ancient bison track, he turned into it and rode steadily northward. He had covered less than two miles when he saw something else that quickened his interest.

Stretching westward from the trail were strands of rusty barbed wire. The trail itself had been steadily veering to the west and Slade estimated that it was little more than three miles to the lip of the desert from where the wire began. As he drew nearer, he saw that where it reached the trail, the wire turned and ran in a northerly direction parallel to the track.

Fenced range," he mused. "No wonder perdition's been bustin' loose up here."

Soon afterward he began passing crops that grew on the far side of the wire. They were good crops, too, and evidenced careful cultivation.

"Grangers," he deduced.

He turned in his saddle and gazed across the unbroken rangeland that rolled eastward to the skyline.

"Uh-huh, small farmers over here inside their fences. Open range to the east. The makin' of a nice steamin' kettle of devil's brew. Shadow, I've a notion you and me will do some business before we leave this section. Same old story, a row between open-range cowmen and the little farmers they figger as nesters, even though the farmers may have bought their land from the state and paid for it. To a cowman, open range is open range, even though he hasn't any real title to it. Mm—there's a cabin ahead, and a jigger standin' in the door."

As Slade drew opposite the cabin, he saw that the man who stood in the doorway had a rifle cradled in his arm. Silent and watchful he stood, making no move, but never taking his eyes off the approaching Hawk.

Slade waved a greeting. He received no acknowledgement. The only response the man indicated was a shifting of his rifle to the ready. Slade stared at him a moment, shrugged his broad shoulders, and rode on.

As he progressed along the trail he passed other cabins. The doors of some were shut, but whenever a door was open, the scene

was a replica of the one upon which his eyes had first rested. A silent, motionless figure standing in the opening, rifle ready, intent and watchful.

After the fourth encounter of this nature, Slade gave vent to an exclamation.

"Whe-e-ew!" he breathed. "I'm beginnin' to get a funny feelin' up and down my back. Got a notion I wouldn't want to ride this way after dark. Them gun-totin' gents shore look like they mean business. A fine country!"

Instinctively his glance strayed toward the western skyline. He could still see the blue shadow of the mountains shouldering the sky, but the desert, now evidently only a few miles distant, was obscured by low, rounded hills thickly clothed in growth.

The trail, too, now rose and dipped over swelling rises and his view to the north was restricted to the next hill crest. A little later, however, he saw a dark smudge lying low in the northern sky. He nodded with satisfaction.

"Reckon the town we're headed for is under that smoke cloud," he told Shadow. "Can't be more'n a mile or so off."

He topped the next hill and the settlement lay in the valley below, bathed in the mellow glow of the late afternoon sunshine. It was a typical cowtown—a straggle of cabins, shacks, 'dobes and false fronts on either side of a twisting main street. The street was a continuation of the trail he was riding.

The town was rather larger than Slade had expected, and even seen from a distance, had a prosperous look. One or two false fronts were two-story "skyscrapers," and some of the buildings sprawled over a considerable area.

"Bet them big ones are saloons," Slade chuckled. "And that long one has the look of a general store. Reckon this is a sort of center for the spreads hereabouts, and from the looks of the range, the spreads ought to be worth while."

His eyes narrowed slightly as he glanced to the left, across the well-grown acres of the grangers. The land to the left of the trail was undoubtedly inferior range, but the soil was evidently rich.

THE condition here was one the Hawk had encountered before. Fine open range, with one section of little use to the cattlemen, and perhaps left unclaimed. The cowmen might hold title to the land to the east, and had neglected to acquire the strip that edged the desert. Grangers had recognized the worth of the land west of the trail and had acquired it.

The cowmen, realizing their neglect too late, resented the intrusion and, as a result, trouble was in the making. With a shake of his black head, *El Halcon* rode down the sag toward the town.

Soon he was passing between scattered buildings that formed the outskirts of the *pueblo*. These drew closer together as he advanced. Everything appeared quiet and orderly until, on rounding a turn of the twisting street, the scene exploded into violent action.

Around a turn ahead scudded a man, as if blown by the wind. Head bent, he raced down the middle of the street. And around the bend in pursuit galloped a group of yelling horsemen.

Even as Slade stared, the fugitive, who was perhaps a score of paces distant, stumbled, reeled, and sprawled headlong in the dust. Up to him raced the horsemen. A big beefy individual riding a little in front jerked his mount to a skittering halt, leaned over and lashed viciously with a heavy quirt.

The man on the ground screamed as the rawhide bit his flesh. He writhed under the blow, tried to rise, and fell back, crying out shrilly. The quirt whirled up for a second blow. *Crash!*

The echoes of a gunshot slammed back and forth between the buildings. The big man howled with pain as the quirt spun from his grasp to fall a dozen feet distant. He wrung his bleeding fingers and yelled a stream of curses. His followers, numbering five, jerked their eyes from their fallen victim and glared at Slade, their hands dropping to the guns swinging from their belts.

But their hands remained where they were. *El Halcon* sat his tall black horse, which had frozen motionless, and regarded them with cold gray eyes. In his right hand was a long black Colt that still wisped smoke. The muzzle, rock-steady, yawned hungrily at the group.

"What the devil's the notion?" bawled the big man, pawing at his bullet-skinned hand.

"And what's the notion of takin' a whack at a jigger who's down and can't help hisself?" Slade countered.

The big man glared and gulped, apparently for the moment at a loss for words. Then he burst out:

"The hellion was warned to stay out of this town!"

"What is he—a cow thief, drygulcher?" Slade inquired mildly.

"He's worse!" mouthed the big man. "He's a cussed nester."

"Never heard tell there was any law against bein' a nester," Slade replied. "Never heard it was against the law for 'em to come into town."

The big man's face was red already, but now, under the cool sarcasm of Slade's musical voice, it blazed with scarlet with passion.

"Blast yuh!" he sputtered. "If yuh didn't have the drop on us, I'd show yuh!"

Slade's hand moved with bewildering speed. Then, the big gun back in its holster, he lounged carelessly in the saddle and regarded the other man with his cold, reckless eyes.

"Haven't got the drop on yuh now," he remarked softly.

CHAPTER III

A Fat Man's Fury

THE red drained from the big man's face, the angry fire left his eyes. They became cool and calculating, with just a hint of sudden speculation in their black depths. Slowly he shook his head.

"Wrong," he said. "We wouldn't none of us have a chance. Yuh got the drop on us even with yore iron leathered. I know a quick-draw man when I see one. Us fellers are just hard workin' ridin' hands. We ain't got time to practise gun-slingin' hours every day." He added with vicious emphasis, "But there's other things besides fast gun hands, as yuh're liable to find out."

"Always was curious about things, so bring 'em on," Slade returned.

Before the big man could reply, a diversion occurred. Around the corner strode a decidedly angry man. He was long and lanky, with a gray face and a bristling mustache. On his sagging vest was a big nickel badge bearing the legend "Sheriff."

His glance rested on the victim of the attack, who had remained where he was on the ground, evidently well-satisfied to be forgotten for the moment. Then the lawman's eyes were raised to the beefy man's face.

"What in thunder yuh been up to now, Bull?" he demanded accusingly. His glance again fell to the prostrate man and apparently took in the situation with understanding. "I've told yuh about ruckus-raisin' in town," he said, addressing the beefy man. "If that jigger on the ground puts a charge agin yuh, I'll lock up the whole bunch of yuh."

The big horseman shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Yuh couldn't make the charge stick, Curtis," he sneered. "This is cow country."

"I know it is," returned the sheriff, "but there's a limit, and shootin' folks down is goin' beyond it, even if they do happen to be nesters."

"Didn't shoot him!" bawled the man called "Bull," his grievance against Slade returning to his mind. "Didn't do no shootin' a-tall. That seven-foot hellion over there did the shootin'. Busted my best quirt and knocked a yard of skin off my hand. Lock *him* up!"

The sheriff regarded Slade with scant approval.

"I will, if I got reason to," he declared. "Here, you"—he spoke to the prostrate nester—"what's this all about, anyhow? What happened to yuh? Get up out of there, if yuh can, and talk."

The victim of the attack got painfully to his feet. He was a little old man with a leathery face and grizzled hair and beard. His eyes were a faded blue, but steady enough. He jerked a thumb at the horsemen.

"Them fellers was chasin' me," he quavered. "I fell down and the fat one began whuppin' me with a rawhide. That tall feller over there shot the whup out of his hand."

The sheriff stared at Slade.

"Yuh mean to tell me he shot a quirt out of Bull Leonard's hand at twenty paces!" he demanded of the nester.

"Yuh're blame right he did!" bellowed Bull Leonard before the nester could reply. "Mighty nigh shot my hand off into the bargain."

"Reckon yuh had it comin'," growled the sheriff. "All right, you and yore hands trail out of here and head back for yore spread. Yuh've raised enough trouble for today."

Bull Leonard said something under his

breath, but nevertheless he turned his horse and sent it charging back up the street, his followers streaming after him.

"I'll be seein' *you*," he flung over his shoulder at Slade.

"Look close the first time, 'cause yuh might not get a second look," the Hawk returned imperturbably.

Leonard growled an oath, and kept on riding. Slade was thinking of the group of horsemen as they vanished around the turn, the concentration furrow deepening between his brows. The sheriff spoke to the nester.

"Why can't you hellions keep out of this town?" he demanded. "Do yore buyin' at Sweetwater."

"It's nigh onto twenty miles to Sweetwater," the nester defended his position. "We can't go drivin' clean up there every time we need some sugar and beans."

"It's a free country," the sheriff admitted, "but there's some doubt about you fellers bein' specially law abidin'. Where's yore wagon?"

"Up the street a mite," the nester told him.

"All right," said the sheriff, "go get it and head back to yore patch before somethin' else happens to yuh."

THE nester nodded, and turned to Slade.

"Thankee, son," he said. "I reckon yuh saved me a prime hidin'. But I'm scared yuh made a bad enemy by doin' it. That fat feller is tarnation mean."

"I got a notion his bark is worse than his bite," Slade deprecated in cheerful accents.

"Yuh're wrong," the sheriff interrupted gloomily. "By the way, where did *you* come from?"

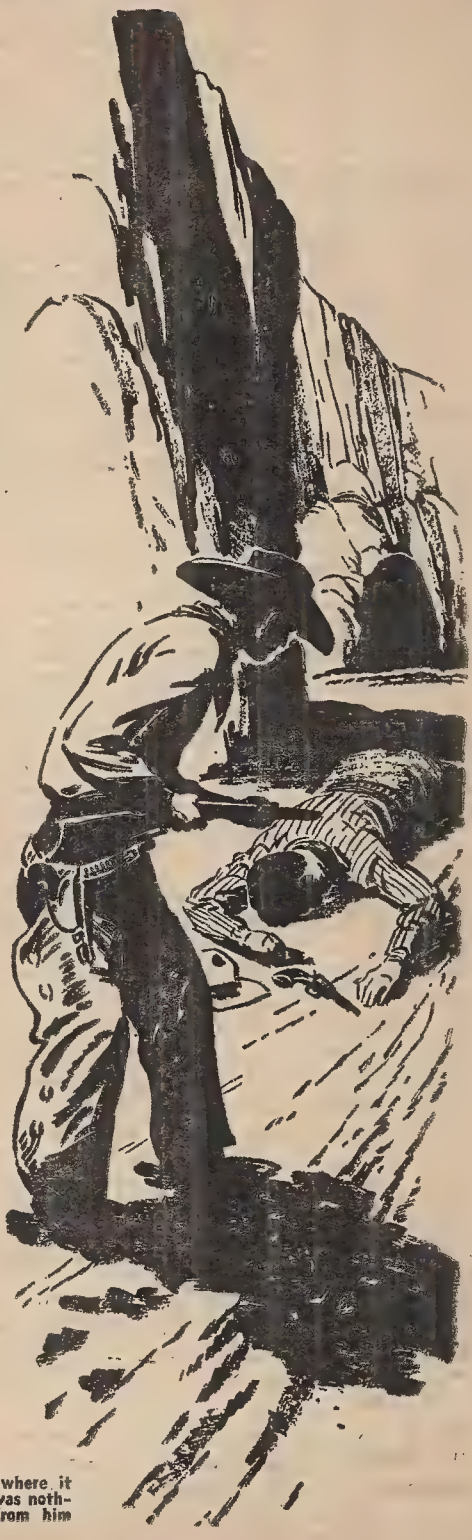
Slade gestured vaguely to the south. The sheriff frowned.

"Just passin' through?" he demanded.

"Mebbe—can't say for shore," Slade returned. "Looks like a nice part of the country. Might take a notion to uncoil my twine hereabouts for a spell."

"Suit me just as well if yuh'd keep on movin'," the sheriff suggested meaningly as the old farmer shambled off. "I got enough troubles without quick-draw two-gun men squattin' hereabouts."

Slade smiled down at the irate old peace



The fellow's gun lay where it had fallen, and there was nothing further to fear from him

officer, his gray eyes sunny.

"Mebbe you won't have so many troubles after I pull out," he remarked cryptically.

"I don't doubt it a bit," the sheriff declared heartily.

"Any place hereabouts I can put my hoss and corral a bit of chuck and a mite of ear poundin'?" Slade asked. "I'm hungry as a woodpecker with a headache."

"Livery stable down the next street," the sheriff grunted. "The Center-Fire Saloon on the corner puts out a good meal, and I reckon yuh can get a room over the saloon, seein' as yuh got the look of a cowhand. Come along and I'll point it out to yuh." As they moved off, he added, "By the way, if yuh figger to uncoil yore twine a spell hereabouts, yuh'd better be well heeled with *dinero,* 'cause yuh'll play hob tyin' onto a job of ridin' after havin' a run-in with Bull Leonard. Bull and the Bradded L just about run this country."

Slade nodded absently. His thoughts were not on the prospect, or lack of it, of a job of riding. They were dwelling on the singular mirage he had witnessed at the end of the bison trail, and on Bull Leonard and his hands. For his keen eyes had noted that both horses and men of the Bradded L outfit were thickly powdered with the gray dust of the desert.

A crowd had gathered at the corner to watch the shindig, but had discreetly kept back out of the way of possible flying lead. It was a silent crowd now as Slade rode through it in the wake of the sheriff. Questioning glances were shot at his tall form, but no remark was made.

A moment later the sheriff indicated the swinging sign of the livery stable with a jerk of his thumb, and mumbled something under his breath that Slade did not catch. Then he stalked on up the street, leaving the Hawk to his own devices.

The stable provided suitable quarters for Shadow, and after giving the big black a rubdown and making sure that all his wants were cared for, Slade repaired to the saloon on the corner. Here again glances were bent in his direction, but were also unaccompanied by audible comment. An affable barkeep poured him a drink and voiced a word of greeting.

"Stranger hereabouts," he stated, rather than asked as Slade raised his drink.

"Sort of," the Hawk admitted.

"Nice town," the barkeep volunteered, "particularly on pay-days. Usually a shootin' or two."

Slade's rather wide mouth quirked slightly at the corners, but he nodded sober agreement. The barkeep nodded back and hurried off to attend to the wants of an impatient customer. Slade sipped his drink and ran his eyes over the room.

It was typical of a cow country saloon, with a dance floor, poker tables, a couple of roulette wheels and a long lunch counter near which were tables for the accommodation of more leisurely diners. The bar was pretty well lined with men in rangeland costume.

ONE attracted Slade's notice, a hulking cowboy with a truculent eye and a bad-tempered face. He kept shooting glances at the Hawk and apparently disapproved of him. Slade's lips quirked again, but he ignored the cowboy's gaze.

A moment later the swinging doors opened and a fat man with a prodigious spread of shoulders entered. He had twinkling little blue eyes set deep in rolls of fat and his cherubic face seemed clothed in a perpetual smile. He moved to the bar with a lightness of foot at variance with his bulk, nodding affably to acquaintances.

Immediately the big cowhand transferred his attention from Slade to the new arrival, who continued to smile, apparently oblivious of the puncher's hostile glances. Finally, however, the cowhand moved down the bar toward the other.

"So yuh're still sellin' stuff to them nesters, Vibart?" Slade heard his voice rumble.

"The fat feller's Mark Vibart who keeps the general store," the bartender remarked at Slade's elbow.

Vibart turned slowly from the bar and smiled at his interrogator.

"Reckon that's right," he agreed. "Their money's good as anybody else's. I'm here to do business."

"And if yuh keep on doin' it, yuh *ain't* goin' to be here!" the cowboy growled. "Yuh'll end up findin' yoreself leavin' town on the end of a rope, if they can find a rope strong enough to haul all the tallow yuh pack."

"Uh-huh." The fat Vibart smiled. "Reckon it'd take a strong rope—and a strong man to handle it. You figger to be strong enough, Watkins?"

The question was asked pleasantly enough, but the intimation was plain.

The big cowboy flushed darkly, his eyes gleamed, his thick hands opened and shut. He took a quick step toward Vibart, swinging his shoulders belligerently.

Things happened, and happened fast. A dimpled hand shot out and gripped the cowboy by the slack of his shirt front, raised him clean off his feet and slammed him to the floor with bone-breaking violence. The owner of the hand smiled down pleasantly at his prostrate antagonist.

It was a climax to bring shivers to even as strong a man as *El Halcon*.

CHAPTER IV

"Other Things"

FOR a moment the puncher seemed dazed. Then, with a roar of rage, he bounded to his feet, going for his gun.

But he never got it. The same pudgy hand that had floored him moved like a flicker of a hawk's wing to Vibart's left armpit. The puncher stiffened as he stared into an unwavering black muzzle. Vibart's pleasant voice broke the tense silence.

"About six feet and three inches will give plenty of head room," he said.

Evidently the cowboy "got" the peculiar remark. His face whitened, his hand dropped from his gun butt. Vibart continued to smile at him with his lips, strangely thin in contrast to his plumb cheeks. His eyes were like to bits of polished flint, with all the twinkle gone from them.

"Vibart's the undertaker, along with keepin' store," the barkeep breathlessly translated the remark for Slade's benefit. "He's measurin' Watkins for a coffin'!"

For a moment the tableau held. Then the cowhand slowly turned and shambled to the door with never a backward glance. The breath men had been holding was exhaled in gusty sighs that filled the room with sound. Vibart deftly slid his gun back into its shoulder holster and smilingly raised his brimming glass with a plump hand that did not spill a drop.

The room hummed with conversation, but gradually interest in the drinks and games lessened the excitement. Slade studied the smiling storekeeper, who sipped his drink with relish and had apparently forgotten all about the gun incident.

"Vibart's quite a feller," remarked the bartender as he paused to refill Slade's glass. "Showed up here just a mite before the nesters began driftin' in. Took over the store from old Sime Thompson. Sime never did much with it, but Vibart makes it go. He's had several run-ins with the cowmen over sellin' to the nesters, but he 'lows he's got a right to sell to anybody who's got money to buy with. Reckon he has."

"Almighty strong and quick on his feet for a fat feller," remarked Slade.

"Yeah, he shore is," said the bartender. "Forks a hoss well, too, though it takes a mighty stout one to pack him. Likes to ride and is always sashayin' around through the hills. Funny, him and Bull Leonard get along prime, though they don't hold the same over nesters. He bought a patch of range from Bull and raises hosses on it. Bull is the big skookum he-wolf of this section. Owns the Bradded L, biggest and best spread hereabouts, and most of the bank. Has a interest in this saloon, too. Yuh'll figger Bull to be considerable of a feller, too, if yuh ever happen to run into him. Might get a job ridin' for him if yuh aim to hang around. He pays top wages for top hands."

Slade smiled lightly, but proferred no comment. The garrulous drink juggler rambled on, evidently highly pleased to find a silent listener.

After finishing his drink, Slade ordered a meal and consumed it in a leisurely fashion, but with the appreciation of a man who has known what it is to find good food scarce. As he was enjoying a final cup of steaming coffee and a cigarette, a pair of dusty cowboys entered.

Slade instantly recognized them as two of the men who had been with Bull Leonard when he'd had his run-in with the Bradded L owner. Their eyes roved over the room, fixed on Slade for a moment, then shifted away. They elbowed their way to the bar and ordered drinks.

Slade watching the big mirror of the backbar, saw the reflection of Mark Vibart's gaze flicker to the new arrivals for an instant.

"That jigger don't miss a thing, even though he don't turn around," he mused, apropos of the fat storekeeper.

The Bradded L punchers were still at the

bar when Slade approached the jovial bartender and inquired about a place to sleep.

"Shore you can get a room upstairs," the drink juggler replied. "I'll send a swamper up with yuh to show yuh the door." He called to an old fellow pottering about with a bucket and mop: "Come here, John!"

The room Slade was conducted to was at the back of the second floor of the building and was clean, plainly furnished, but comfortable. Slade sat on the bed and cleaned his guns before retiring. He opened the window wide to let in the cool breeze that stirred the leaves of a big tree growing close to the building wall. For some time he lay on the bed, thinking and watching the patterns of light and shadow the moonbeams filtering through the leaves of the tree weaved on the floor. Finally, the soft murmur of the wind-swayed branches lulled him to sleep. . . .

EL *HALCON* was a light sleeper at all times, and tired though he was, when a slight sound out of the ordinary came in his room it aroused him instantly. He had the feeling that he had slept for some hours. He wondered momentarily if the noise that had awakened him was due to the activities of a new day. But the window square showed black, the moon having crossed the sky so that the rear of the building was in deep shadow.

Abruptly he was aware that the sound continued—a slight, sibilant sound like to the hissing of a large snake. He sat up in bed, glancing about, and uttered a sharp exclamation.

On the floor, just below the window sill, bloomed a flower of fire that crept steadily toward the bed, throwing off a spurtle of tiny sparks. An acrid smell stung his nostrils.

Slade bounded from his bed, instantly recognizing that pungent whiff of smoke for what it was. He groped frantically along the floor until his hand encountered a couple of greasy cylinders bound together with wire. He seized the dynamite sticks and started to throw them out the window, but realized that the tree branches grazing the window ledge were apt to rebound the deadly thing back into the room or cause it to fall close to the building.

There was no time to fumble for a knife, and he dared not risk jerking the fuse from the cap clamped to the dynamite. Setting his teeth to the tough fibre covering of the fuse, as near the cap as possible, he chewed frantically.

The fuse resisted stubbornly, and ever the sputtering bloom of fire crept closer. Slade redoubled his efforts, tearing at the resisting fibres that gave so slowly. He felt the fuse part, a stream of sparks seared his mouth, and for a terrible instant he feared he was too late. But even as he stiffened in anticipation of the explosion that would tear him to bits, the severed end of the fuse dropped to the floor and sputtered out with a final baffled hiss.

El Halcon straightened up, holding the dynamite in one hand, and mopping at his streaming face with the other.

"And was that close!" he muttered. "Another shake of a coyote's tail and they would have had to take up what was left of me with a blotter!"

He stared at the dark window square. It was easy to understand how the lethal bomb had come to be in his room. There was a loop in the wire that bound the dynamite sticks together, a loop through which the end of a pole could be inserted.

"Climbed up the tree, shinned out on the big branch and jiggled the stuff through the window with the pole," he muttered. "Lucky for me they had to cut the fuse sort of long so's they'd have time to make a get-away before the stuff cut loose. Nice bunch of sidewinders! Don't mind wreckin' a buildin' and mebbe killin' half a dozen other folks just to wipe out a jigger they want to do away with. Reckon they are almighty surprised about now because they haven't heard the stuff cut loose. But I don't figger there's much chance of 'em comin' back to see why."

Nevertheless, he closed the window tightly before lying down again. Fumbling the "makin's" from a pocket, he rolled and lighted a cigarette, carefully shielding the tiny flame of the match in cupped hands. He smoked thoughtfully, keeping out of direct line with the window. As he pinched out the butt, he grimly repeated Bull Leonard's words of the day before:

"There's other things besides fast gun hands!"

Slade slept late and it was nearly noon when he descended to the saloon for breakfast. As he ate, the dynamite sticks, carefully padded and wrapped in a towel, reposed on the table beside him. He was just finishing a last cigarette when Sheriff Cur-

tis entered the room and glanced sharply about.

The old peace officer was plainly in a bad temper. He spotted Slade, and strode to his table. For a moment he stood silent, glaring down at the Hawk.

"So the cussed nesters have brought *El Halcon* in to do their gun slingin' for 'em, eh?" he growled at length.

Slade appeared little impressed by the sheriff's belligerent tone.

"From what I saw yesterday, they sort of need somebody to sling a gun for 'em now and then," he remarked. "They don't seem to get any protection from those sworn to extend it to all citizens of the State."

THE sheriff flushed darkly at the Hawk's implication.

"We don't need jiggers hereabouts who take the law in their own hands," the lawman snapped.

"Yuh appear to be plumb well supplied with that kind, all right," Slade replied with a trace of grimness.

This remark, as was perhaps natural, did not improve the temper of the sheriff.

"Them nesters ain't goin' to get away with it," he declared. "Yuh're trailin' yore twine out of here pronto. If yuh stay here, yuh'll stay behind bars."

"On what charge?" the Hawk inquired mildly.

"I'll get one," the sheriff retorted. "I'll have Bull Leonard swear one out. Yuh took a shot at him yesterday. Oh, I know yuh're a smooth hombre. Ain't nobody ever been able to make a charge stick agin yuh—but yuh got killin' to yore credit."

"Ever hear of me killin' anybody who didn't have a killin' comin'?" Slade asked.

"That's beside the point," the sheriff replied. "Law enforcement belongs in the hands of duly appointed or elected officers of the law."

"That's what I was thinkin' yesterday," Slade nodded. "Only it didn't seem to be workin' out hereabouts."

The sheriff tugged viciously at his mustache, and for a moment seemed at a loss for words.

"I'm tellin' yuh to trail yore twine," he said at last.

Slade got to his feet, and smiled down at the irate old sheriff from his great height.

"S'pose we amble up to yore office and talk it over," he suggested.

"A prime notion," the sheriff agreed heartily. "The jail is in back of my office."

CHAPTER V

Drygulched

LIPS quirking slightly at the corners, Slade picked up the wrapped dynamite sticks, put on his hat and followed the sheriff from the saloon. He preceded the peace officer into his office and, without invitation, drew up a chair and sat down beside the sheriff's desk, placing the bundle of dynamite upon it. His amused glance on the sheriff, who seemed in more danger of exploding than the dynamite, he proceeded to roll a cigarette.

"Have a chair," he invited.

The sheriff's jaw dropped slightly. He seemed dazed. Involuntarily, it seemed, he sat down. Slade continued to regard him with a quizzical glance. The Hawk liked the looks of the old fellow and believed that

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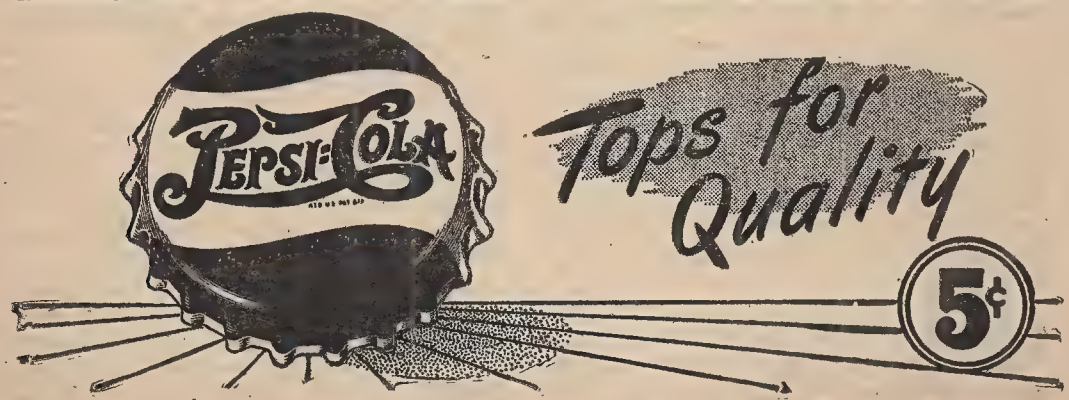

he was honestly trying to do his duty as he saw it. Suddenly he shot a surprising remark at Curtis.

"Bull Leonard had a lot to do with gettin' yuh elected to the office, didn't he, Sheriff?" And he added, before the sheriff could reply: "Only natural that yuh should sort of lean toward him and the cowmen. But if yuh lean too far, yuh're liable to lose yore balance."

"Now look here," the sheriff began truculently.

But Slade, who had been fumbling with a cunningly concealed secret pocket in his broad leather belt, smiled slightly and laid something on the desk between them. It was a silver star set on a silver circle, the feared and honored badge of the Texas Rangers!

Sheriff Curtis' eyes bulged a bit as he stared at the glittering emblem of the most famous force of fighting law enforcement officers the continent ever knew.

"A—a Ranger!" he gulped at length. "Yuh're a Ranger!"

"Captain McNelty got yore letter," Slade replied. "Figgered if old Tom Curtis, who was in the Rangers with him back in the days when yuh both rode with Iron-hand Arlington, needed help to straighten out a mess, things must be purty bad. Sent me up to give the situation a once-over. Yes, I'm a Ranger—undercover man for Captain Jim's troop."

"A Ranger!" repeated the sheriff. "*El Halcon* a Ranger. Well, if that don't take the bark off the stump!"

"Are things as bad hereabouts as yore letter led Captain Jim to believe?" Slade asked.

"Worse!" growled the sheriff. "Bad ain't no name for it. There's the makin' of a first class range war hereabouts. Them nesters are salty hombres, mostly from the Kentucky mountain country. Pack long rifles, and know how to use 'em. Why, one of Bull Leonard's hands was drygulched over on the edge of the desert a couple weeks back, and the slug that drilled him through the shoulder was fired from way up in the hills nigh a mile off."

"That's shootin' in any man's country," remarked Slade.

"But the hellions won't have it easy if things do bust loose," the sheriff hurried on. "You know what Panhandle cowhands are like. Leonard's outfit is plenty salty, and there's others, like the Archer brothers, and the Peasleys. And them hoss wranglers on Mark Vibart's spread ain't to be sneezed at, either. They don't set any more store by nesters than any other rope twirler, even though Vibart does sell to the nesters and sort of upholds 'em."

"Yuh keep callin' those farmers nesters," Slade remarked. "Are they really nesters? Have they just squatted here without title to the land they're on?"

"Oh, they got title, all right," the sheriff admitted. "They bought their land from the State. It was open range."

Slade nodded. "How about the spreads?" he asked. "Do the cowmen hold title or is it all open range?"

"Leonard has a sound holdin'," replied the sheriff, "and so have the Archers and one or two others. Them old families have been in this section a mighty long time and their holdin's were bought and paid for years ago. But I've a notion some of the other boys are kind of shaky. Yuh know how it is in cow country."

SLADE nodded again.

"And they ain't so easy in their minds," he remarked. "Sort of scared somebody might buy from under 'em, eh?"

"Sort of," the sheriff agreed. "But I've a notion their claims would stand up in court, if it really came to a law fight."

"Don't they know that?"

"Reckon they do."

"Then," Slade persisted, "why are they so on the prod against the nesters, who, as I understand it, just got title to range the cowmen didn't figger worth tyin' down?"

"Because ever since the nesters started comin' in, trouble has been bustin' loose hereabouts, that's why," replied Curtis. "There's been more'n one drygulchin', and a lot of cows has been rustled."

"Any proof the grangers are responsible?" Slade asked.

"Not any that would stand up in court," the sheriff was forced to admit. "But if it ain't them, who is it? Everythin' was peaceful till they showed up."

"How do the wideloopers get the cows out of the country?" Slade asked. "From what I've seen of it, it looks to me like the only place they could hole 'em up is in the mountains over across the New Mexico line."

"That's what we'd all like to know," growled the sheriff. "They don't run 'em

across that desert, that's shore."

"Why not?"

"Because no man livin' could make the trip across there without bein' baked by the heat and choked to death by the salt dust," the sheriff replied.

"How about travelin' at night?"

"Might be possible, if yuh could get across in one night," the sheriff agreed. "But the catch to that is yuh can't. It's a full two days' ride across that stretch of scorched perdition, and unless a feller could find water and hole up durin' the day, he'd never make it."

"No water between here and the mountains?"

"Nary a drop."

"Folks believed there wasn't a drop of water in the desert up north of here, until Arlington and his Rangers found the Lost Lakes out in the desert there," Slade remarked thoughtfully.

"Uh-huh," agreed the sheriff, "but Arlington had somethin' to go on. Recollect, he was chasin' Injuns at the time. There was a Injun legend that there was lakes out in the desert there, about half-way across, and two days' ride from any other water. Arlington took a chance on it—in the winter, when the heat and dust ain't so bad. When they'd mighty nigh passed out, they hit on a dry salt lake and found some springs on the west side of the dry lake, where they usually are in the plains country, if there's any at all.

"If they hadn't hit on an old Injun trail out there in the desert and follered it to the water, they'd have been goners. There ain't no trails on the desert down here. That powdery surface won't hold. One swipe of the wind and anythin' lookin' like a trail is wiped out. Nope, there ain't no water out there. Even the Injuns kept away from that section.

"Still, folks are losin' cows that go somewheres," Slade commented.

The sheriff was about to reply when a clatter of approaching hoofs sounded on the street outside. The lawman looked out the window, and jumped to his feet.

"Blazes!" he exploded. "Are the hellions comin' to gun up the town?"

Glancing through the window, Slade saw a dozen or more men riding up the street. They were lean, grim-looking men, for the most part, bleak of face, stern of eye. In their arms they cradled long rifles.

As the sheriff stared at them, hands dropping to his guns, the grangers pulled up in front of the office and dismounted. A moment later they filed into the room.

"Be you the sheriff?" one asked, his eyes on Curtis.

"Reckon yuh know I am," the sheriff replied. "What yuh want?"

"We come to report a matter," the other man replied. "One of our boys, young Chester Nelson, rode out into the hills early yesterday mornin'. He didn't show up to home last night."

"Well, what of it?" growled the sheriff. "Yuh want me to go lookin' for him?"

"Yuh don't need to," the granger replied grimly. "Us fellers went lookin' for him, and found him—what was left of him—about ten miles out on the desert. He'd been murdered—shot in the back."

DURING a moment of tense silence following the startling statement, both Slade and the sheriff stared at the grangers.

"Yuh shore about this?" Sheriff Curtis asked at length.

"We don't aim to make no mistake," the granger replied. "And we want justice."

The sheriff swore wearily.

"Everythin' is gettin no better fast!" he wailed. "What in tarnation was the feller doin' out on that infernal desert?"

"Chet was a funny feller, in some ways," the granger replied. "He was always ridin' around through the hills, and out over our holdin's in the desert. He was a educated feller. Went to college and studied about minin' and things like that."

Walt Slade spoke up for the first time.

"A minin' engineer?" he queried.

The granger hesitated, glancing suspiciously at the Hawk.

"Yuh can talk to him same as me," put in the sheriff. "He's a smart feller and may be able to help."

"Yeah, I reckon you'd have called Chet somethin' like that," the granger said.

Slade nodded, and asked another question.

"Yuh say you fellers have holdin's out in the desert?"

"That's right," the granger returnd grimly. "Them smart politician fellers over to the State capital outslicked us. They sold us a tract twenty miles by twenty. It's twenty miles of good land, south by north, all right. But east by west, the last fifteen miles or so run out into that infernal desert

and ain't worth shucks."

Slade nodded his understanding. He knew that such transactions had taken place where new settlers were concerned, in Texas and in other states.

"And the land out there interested young Nelson?"

"That's right," the granger agreed. "He was almighty curious about it for some reason or other, but he was a close-mouthed feller and never told nobody why."

Slade nodded a third time, thoughtfully.

"And why, do yuh suppose, was he killed?"

"Reckon that ain't hard to answer," the granger replied, his voice hard and resentful. "The cattle raisin' fellers hate us. Reckon they'd kill us all, if they got a chance."

"Now hold on—" the sheriff began belligerently, but Slade's quiet voice interrupted before he could get into his stride.

"It don't always pay to jump at conclusions," he said. "So far as I can find out, both sides up here are almighty busy accusin' the other feller of twirlin' a wide loop. Ever occur to yuh that yuh both might be wrong?"

"If the cattle raisers didn't shoot Chet, who did?" the granger demanded.

"That's what the sheriff will be tryin' to find out," Slade replied. "What yuh just asked is the same as what the cowmen are askin'—'If the grangers don't run off our cows, who does?' Mebbe there'll be an answer to both questions before long, and mebbe the answer will be a big surprise to all concerned!"

CHAPTER VI

"Powder House"

WALT SLADE stood up, towering over the other men in the room, and spoke with the quiet authority that expects, and gets, obedience.

"You fellers trail back to yore homes," he said. "Don't go off half-cocked and start somethin' yuh'll be sorry for later. I know how yuh feel, but nobody ever gained anything by sod pawin'."

The grangers stared at him, muttered among themselves. But finally their tall, leathery-faced leader nodded reluctant acquiescence.

"You sound like a feller who knows what he's talkin' about," he told *El Halcon*. "All right, we'll do as yuh say."

"Where was young Nelson's body found?" Slade asked suddenly as they turned to go.

"About five miles south of here, and mebbe ten miles out on the desert," the granger replied. "He told Sime Collison he aimed to ride out into the desert a piece yesterday. That's how we come to look for him out there. We figgered mebbe he'd got lost or hurt hisself."

After the grangers had departed, Slade upwrapped the dynamite sticks and regaled Sheriff Curtis with an account of how he had acquired them. The sheriff swore a string of blistering oaths and shook his head in a bewildered way.

"I know what yuh're thinkin'," he said, "but I'd go bond that Bull Leonard never had anythin' to do with a thing like that. Who in blazes is out to get yuh, anyhow?"

Slade asked a question of his own.

"Just who tipped yuh off that I was *El Halcon*?"

"Why, a feller come up to me on the street and told me," the sheriff replied. "The feller—Billy Woods of the Cross W—said folks was talkin' about it in the saloons. Seems somebody spotted yuh when yuh rode into town. Just who, Billy didn't know."

Slade nodded thoughtfully, and refrained from comment.

For an hour or more he talked with the sheriff, obtaining all the information the peace officer could give him concerning the country and its inhabitants.

"Regulation cow country with mostly plain cow country folks," Curtis summed up. "Nearly all of 'em have lived here all their lives. It was peaceful till the nesters showed up. Leonard has always had the most say as to how things are run."

"Other folks sort of foller his lead?" Slade remarked.

"That's right," Curtis agreed.

"And yuh say Leonard has been the big loser of cows since the wideloopin' started?"

"That's right, too."

"How is his holdin' situated?"

"His spread starts about five miles to the north of town," the sheriff explained. "Runs from the edge of the desert over east. His best range is the west end of it. Some hills between the trail and the desert, with canyons that make for good shelter from heat

in the summer and snow in the winter. His ranchhouse sets close to the trail a little over five miles north of here."

"So it would be easy to run cows from his west holdings out onto the desert?"

"That's right. Also they could circle west through the hills and head south to the nester's holdin's. I'm of the opinion that the beefs are run south and holed up on one of them farms and then run on south in the dark. It's the only way I can figger it. They couldn't take 'em north, that's shore. Never could get a widelooped herd across all the spreads up there and past Sweetwater, the railroad town. They got to go south."

Slade nodded, and stood up.

"Still a lot of daylight left," he remarked. "Think I'll take a little ride up toward Leonard's spread and look things over."

"Not a bad notion," agreed the sheriff. "Want me to go along?"

Slade shook his head. "Us ridin' around together might cause somebody to put two and two together and make five," he explained. "The longer I can keep my Ranger connections under cover, the more use I am to the outfit."

CURTIS nodded his understanding. "Uh-huh, lettin' folks think yuh're sort of on the owlhoot side is good for the outfit," he admitted. "But it's liable to be mighty bad for you sometime. Yuh're sort of looked on as fair game, yuh know. There are lawmen who'd figger it quite a feather in their rainsheds to drop a loop on *El Halcon*. One of 'em is liable to shoot first some time and ask questions afterward."

"I'll take a chance on that," Slade said, and smiled as he left the office.

Sheriff Curtis thoughtfully regarded the door that closed behind the Hawk's broad back.

"Uh-huh," he grunted, "and if shootin' that quirt out of Leonard's hand at twenty paces wasn't a plumb accident, I've a notion yuh're purty safe in takin' a chance!"

Slade saddled Shadow and rode northward along the trail. He took his time, studying the terrain as he passed over it. West of the trail was broken country, the low, rugged hills slashed by shallow canyons and draws. It was a perfect setup for reaching the desert country with a purloined herd. The great question, however, was where would the owlhoots go after reaching the desert?

"The whole thing hinges on whether there's water out there somewheres—hidden water nobody around here knows about," he told himself.

His thoughts reverted to the peculiarly marked shoulder bone sunk in the sand at the end of the bison trail. More and more he was of the opinion that in the crude drawings on the "signboard" lay the key to the mystery. But just what the cryptic sketch stood for he, at the moment, had not the slightest idea.

With a shrug of his broad shoulders, he dismissed the matter from his mind and gave his whole attention to the country he was traversing.

Rounding a bend that curved through a straggle of grove, he sighted a big ranchhouse set on a low hill and close to the trail.

The *casa* was a spacious building and had recently received a fresh coat of paint, so that it gleamed in the afternoon sunshine. The walls were a glittering white, the window frames and the shutters were green, the roof a bright red. A yellow striping circled the building, passing under the window ledges. The effect, Slade thought, was original, and most pleasing.

As he admired the novel color scheme, he saw a man riding down the broad drive that led from the trail to the ranchhouse. A moment later he recognized the bulky form of Bull Leonard.

Slade continued to ride slowly forward. He was directly opposite the ranchhouse when Leonard turned into the trail. The Bradded L owner evidently recognized his antagonist of the day before, for he jerked his horse to a halt and sat staring, his brows drawn together.

But as Slade was about to ride past, Leonard held up his hand. Slade reined in and sat awaiting developments. Leonard eyed him a moment, then spoke.

"Feller," he said gruffly, "I just wanted to say to yuh that I don't hold no hard feelin's over what happened yesterday. After I got to thinkin' about it, I wasn't over proud of the whole business. Takin' a swipe at that old jigger when he was on the ground wasn't such a nice thing to do. If I hadn't been so ringy I was ready to bust, I wouldn't have done it.

"Yuh see, I'd just lost a herd of prime beefs and spent the whole mornin' ridin' around on that infernal desert tryin' to fig-

ger out where them blasted nesters had run 'em to. I shore had my bristles up, and when the first thing I saw when I hit town was a nester swellin' around like he owned the diggin's, I shore got on the prod pronto."

"Yeah, reckon yuh had reason for flyin' off the handle," Slade admitted.

AFTER getting the matter off his chest, Leonard appeared to be in a sociable mood.

"S'pose yuh amble up to the *casa* with me and share a surroundin' of chuck," he invited. "I got a prime cook."

"Could do worse, I reckon," Slade accepted.

Together they rode up the drive to the gleaming ranchhouse.

"Yuh got a nice paint job there," Slade admired. "Yuh have a good eye for color, suh."

"Mark Vibart figgered that out," Leonard chuckled. "I bought the paint from him and he give me the lowdown on how to use it. Mark is smart about such things."

"Uh-huh I've a notion he is," Slade agreed thoughtfully.

Leonard bellowed for a wrangler to care for the horses. He and Slade entered the big living room of the ranchhouse. As Leonard closed the door behind them, Slade halted abruptly, staring at an almost square box of heavy boards that reposed on a long table in the center of the room. The lid was off, revealing rows of greasy looking, brownish cylinders. Two of the top row were missing, Slade noted.

"Funny place to keep dynamite, eh?" chuckled Leonard, following the Hawk's gaze. "Safest place for it, though. I ain't got no powder house. And anyhow it will all be used up tomorrow. We're blastin' out a water-hole on the east range. The boys are drillin' the rock now. Be ready to set the charges in the mornin'."

Leonard seemed a bit too anxious to explain the presence of the explosive and the fact that two sticks were missing. But Slade did not seem to notice this.

"I never could get friendly enough with dynamite to take it into the house," Slade remarked dryly. "It's plumb temperamental."

Leonard laughed.

"Don't pay no attention to it," he said. "Nothing like grub to put a man at his ease. I reckon you're as hungry as me."

"You hit the nail on the head," Slade said.

CHAPTER VII

Desert "Mountain"

SLADE enjoyed a good meal with the Bradded L owner. Afterward they smoked in the living room, and talked.

"It was a nice section before them 'tarnal nesters drifted in and spoiled it," Leonard complained. "Nothin' but trouble ever since. But we've had about all we're goin' to stand," he added grimly. "The boys are goin' to hold a meetin' Saturday night, and I've a notion it's goin' to be showdown. Them hellions are either goin' to trail out of here or be run out."

"It'll mean killin's if yuh try it, suh," Slade remarked gravely. "Them fellers are Kentucky hill stock and don't run easy."

"We ain't exactly a Sunday School gatherin' hereabout ourselves," Leonard replied.

"Besides, them fellers have title from the State," Slade reminded. "Yuh'll find yoreselves outside the law."

"We've been makin' the law up here for a good many years," Leonard countered. "The sheriff knows which side his bread is buttered on."

"There are other law enforcement agencies besides the sheriff's office," Slade said.

"Yeah, I know what yuh mean—the Rangers." Leonard nodded. "But I've a notion the Rangers ain't goin' to interfere in a purely local matter like this."

"Yuh could be mistaken," Slade told him quietly.

"We'll chance it," growled Leonard. "I tell yuh we've stood about all we're goin' to stand. That herd I lost the other night was a prime one all ready for shippin'. It run into a good many thousands of dollars. A few more like that, and *I'll* be run out, and the same goes for the rest of the boys. We have to put up with enough losses from blizzards and the like. We can't stand hefty wideloopin's."

Slade did not argue the point further. He realized that Leonard meant just what he said. Another Cuevas County war was in the making, with disastrous results promised for all concerned.

El Halcon was grave as he rode back to town.

Although he had spent a good portion of

the day in the saddle, Slade was riding again shortly after midnight. He headed north by way of the Sweetwater trail, but a mile or so out of town he veered sharply to the west across the rangeland. After a couple of hours of riding he reached the abrupt edge of the desert country.

The vast arid expanse lay weird and ghostly in the moonlight, looking as quiet and inscrutable and alien to man as the star-studded reaches of the sky above. But without hesitation, Slade sent Shadow out onto the deathly desolation. Soon he veered once more, until he was riding south by west.

Even in the comparative cool of the night the heat was oppressive, the dust choking and terrible. A furnace wind blew out of the west and stirred up the powdery surface in strangling clouds that caused both horse and man to cough and sneeze continually.

But grimly the Hawk persisted, heading south by west with a plainsman's uncanny sense of distance and direction. The eastern sky was flushing rose and golden when he pulled Shadow to a halt on the lip of a vast depression in the desert floor.

"Unless I'm a heap mistook, or them granger fellers were off on their calculations, somewhere about here is where Chet Nelson was cashed in," he told Shadow. "Soon as it gets light enough, we'll sashay down into that hollow and have a looksee. I'm already beginnin' to get sort of a notion, hoss."

The great hollow was a terrible place. The silence could almost be heard. Its wide floor had the appearance of being sifted with the dust of desiccated bones. It was a fitting place for Death to have his ghastly throne of bleached skulls. Light glowed about its rim, but the shadows seemed loath indeed to depart from its depths. But when at last the light flowed in a flood over the eastern rim, the whole great surface of the amphitheatre gleamed and sparkled like a vast robe sewn with pearls.

His interest quickening, Slade rode down the slope and out onto the glowing surface. He dismounted, squatted on his heels, and gathered handfuls of the dust, examining it with great care.

It was delicately fibrous and was silky to the touch. Oblivious to the swiftly increasing heat, he burrowed deep into the surface dust, which grew more compact as the depth of the hole increased.

AFTER a while he moved to another spot and repeated the burrowing process. He did this many times, over a wide area, until he was convinced that the whole great depression was underlaid with a massive sedimentary bed. Finally he straightened up, and wiped the sweat from his eyes. With puckered lids he stared across the glittering reaches.

"So that was why young Chet Nelson was killed," he muttered. "The pore devil knew too much. And I saw the mirage of the killin'! This hole is a perfect setup for a mirage. The air down here is heated tremendously and becomes much more rarefied than the air even a few feet above the lip of the basin. The rays arrivin' from a distant object in a nearly horizontal but slightly downward direction can't penetrate into the lighter air but are reflected upward by the boundary.

"To anyone standin' over at the edge of the desert, the images would seem to be suspended in mid-air. Funny how things work out. I reckon there's always an Eye on what we do that we hadn't ought to do."

Retrieving Shadow, he left the ghastly hole and headed back out of the desert. More than once before reaching the rangeland, he thought the Big Jump was in order for both him and his horse; but he finally made it. He and Shadow were both so exhausted by the terrible struggle across the blistering sands that they went to sleep in the cool shade that overhung the banks of a shallow stream some distance from the desert's lip.

It was well toward evening when Slade awakened, much refreshed. For several minutes he stood staring across the grim expanse of the desert shimmering in the red light of the sinking sun.

"It was a tough grind," he told Shadow, who was contentedly cropping grass nearby.

"Uh-huh, a tough grind. But feller, yuh ain't seen nothin' yet!"

The lovely blue dusk was sifting down from the hills when Slade reached the town of Griffin. After taking care of Shadow and eating a hearty meal, he repaired to Sheriff Curtis' office.

"I want yuh to swear me in as a special deputy and give me a badge," he told the sheriff. "Got a chore to do."

"I'll go with yuh," offered the sheriff.

Slade shook his black head.

"Got to do this one alone," he said. He did not see fit to tell the peace officer that

he was gambling his life on a hunch and did not care to expose another to the almost certain terrible death did the hunch prove wrong.

With the badge of a deputy sheriff stowed in his pocket, he rode swiftly southward along the trail that had brought him to Griffin.

Shadow covered the distance to the end of the old bison track by midnight, but just the same Slade's face was grave as he glanced at the great clock in the sky.

"Less than six hours before sunrise," he told the horse. "We ought to have eight or nine for this chore, at the very least. Well, reckon we'll have to chance it."

Dismounting before the bison bone signboard at the desert's edge, he studied the symbols daubed on it in yellow, green and red. The moon shone brightly in the cloudless sky, revealing every detail of the crude drawing.

"If this thing is like any other map, the top should be north, the left side west," he mused, tracing the pointing arrow with a fingertip. "If that's so, the arrow points just about due northwest. Come on, feller, let's start out to take the Big Jump!"

Shadow's hoofs kicked up clouds of the choking dust as he slogged his way across the desert. But the night was fairly cool, though the atmosphere was thick and heavy, giving a sort of creamy feel to the air. Slade muffled his neckerchief about his mouth to shut out as much of the irritating dust as possible, and grimly endured the discomfort.

The hours sped on until the east turned gray, the stars grew pale and vanished, and the golden moon, low in the sky, waxed wan, her mountain ridges standing out clear against her sickly face like the bones on the face of a dying man. The east blushed primrose. Golden bars of light stabbed to the zenith, the sky brightened to softest blue. A tremulous glow draped the desert, the sun rose in majesty and it was day.

As light flooded the vast expanse of arid sands, Slade strained his bloodshot eyes to the northeast. He gave a sight of relief as he saw, many miles away, a huge dark mass that rose, mountainlike, from the desert's level floor.

"That's it, Shadow," he mumbled through the dust that choked his throat. "If my hunch is right, we're all right. If it ain't—well the buzzards won't go to bed hungry tonight!"

SWIFTLY the desert became a blazing inferno. The mass of rock for which he was heading became misty and distorted to Slade's gaze. His eyes burned, the blood hammered at his temples, and a great bell seemed to be tolling in his head. Shadow staggered on with lolling tongue and hanging head, his sides heaving, spasmodic shiverings rippling his dust-powdered hide.

Nearer and nearer loomed the rock, its dark side reflecting the beams of the glaring sun, its towering pinnacles reaching toward the brassy sky. Now it hung directly over them, the heat beating back from it in scorching waves.

Shadow struggled along its curving base until the trend of its rugged side turned from north to west. Slade straightened in the saddle, staring.

Directly ahead was a heap of talus that had evidently sloughed off from the upper reaches of the butte. And just beyond the scattered mass was a dark opening in the face of the cliff. Slade's cracked lips moved in an exclamation, then with bewildering speed he hurled himself sideward out of the saddle, sliding his Winchester from the boot as he fell. And even as he hit the sands, a bullet yelled through the space his body had occupied the instant before.

A man was running toward him from the cliff, a smoking gun in his hand. He fired a second time and the slug kicked sand into Slade's face. Flinging the Winchester to his shoulder, Slade snapped two quick shots under Shadow's body.

The gunman halted as if struck by a mighty fist. He reeled, threw up his hands, and pitched headlong onto the sands to lie writhing and moaning.

Slade leaped to his feet, rifle ready for instant action. The fellow's gun lay where it had fallen and a glance told Slade that its owner was hard hit and that there was nothing further to fear from him.

He approached and stared down into a hard, gash-mouthed face now twisted and distorted by sharp agony. The heavy bullet from the Winchester had smashed through the fellow's shoulder. He was conscious, but bleeding profusely. Slade set his rifle aside and knelt beside him.

"All right," he told the fellow grimly. "Talk, and I'll tie yuh up and give yuh a chance to pull through. Otherwise yuh'll bleed to death in minutes."

"Help me, blast yuh!" the man gasped.

"I'll talk! Help me, I ain't ready to die!"

"Notion yuh'll never be ready," Slade remarked as he went to work on the bleeding shoulder.

CHAPTER VIII

El Dorado

AS SLADE stanched the bleeding and bandaged the wound with strips torn from the owlhoot's shirt, he listened intently to the babble of words pouring from the man's lips. When he had finished and had sunk into a half stupor, the Hawk nodded with satisfaction.

Picking up the wounded man's bulky form without apparent effort, and bidding Shadow to follow, he headed for the opening in the cliff face which was some twenty feet wide by eight in height. It proved to be the mouth of a corridor running into the rock.

With Shadow's irons clicking at his heels, Slade stumbled through the darkness until he saw a gleam of light ahead. Another moment and he stood in a vast cavern hollowed out, evidently by natural forces, in the heart of the rock. It was lighted by a fire burning in a crude stone fireplace and by several torches stuck in crevices in the wall. One whole side of the wide enclosure was fenced in by strands of barbed wire. In this strange corral milled and grumbled fully a hundred head of prime beef cattle.

"Bull Leonard's widelooped herd!" Slade exclaimed aloud. "Well, if this doesn't beat all!"

Several bunks were built along the near wall of the cave. On one of these Slade deposited the unconscious owlhoot. Nearby a tethered horse contentedly munched a helpin' of oats.

Making sure that there was nothing to fear from the wounded man, Slade examined the cave. In the rear wall was a dark opening similar to the one that gave entrance to the chamber.

Slade plucked one of the torches from its place and entered the passage, which had a sharp downward slope. He pursued it for a hundred yards or more, until to his ears came the sound of running water. Another moment and he stood on the near bank of a rushing stream of unknown width. The black water hissed smoothly against the rock at his feet, coming out of the darkness and vanishing into the darkness again, its surface gleaming in the torchlight.

Slade whistled to Shadow, who came pounding and snorting through the dark, and together they had a long and satisfying drink of the cool water.

Returning to the cave and rummaging about, Slade discovered an ample supply of provisions, also provender for the horses and the cattle. He cooked a meal, ate it with relish and cat-napped on one of the bunks. All day and night he remained in the cave, caring for the wounded man, who was too sick and weak to be a menace. Just as dawn of the second day was breaking, Slade took up his position at the mouth of the corridor.

The day was breaking in scarlet and gold when two horsemen loomed out of the shadows. Slade retreated to the cave and waited. Soon he heard a rumble of voices and the pound of boots on the rock floor of the corridor. A moment later two men entered the cave.

One Slade had never seen before, but in the bulky, broad-shouldered figure of the second he recognized Mark Vibart, the Griffin storekeeper.

The pair halted in paralyzed astonishment as their eyes fell on the Hawk's towering form, outlined in the bright blaze of the birch torches he had lighted. On Slade's broad breast gleamed the deputy sheriff's badge. The thumbs of his slender hands were hooked over his double cartridge belts. His voice rang out:

"In the name of the State of Texas! Throw up yore hands! Yuh're under arrest for robbery and murder!"

For an instant there was silence, the silence of utter amazement. Then Mark Vibart's right hand flashed to his left armpit. Instantly the cave roared and bellowed to an explosion of gunfire.

Slade's hat turned sideward on his head. One shirt sleeve jerked as if plucked by an urgent hand. But he stood tall and erect as Mark Vibart and his follower reeled and pitched headlong, their guns dropping from their nerveless hands.

His guns ready for action if needed, Slade strode forward and stood over the fallen men. Vibart's follower was dead, but Vibart himself was still alive, though going fast. He glared up at Slade with satanic hate burning in his glazing eyes. His dying gaze

fixed on the deputy sheriff's badge.

"Blast yuh!" he panted. "Blast yuh, yuh could fool old Curtis, but yuh can't fool me. I know yuh, *El Halcon!* Horned in to skim off the cream, eh?"

SLADE slowly shook his head. He held a gleaming object before the dying owlhoot's eyes—not the deputy sheriff's badge, but the star of the Texas Rangers.

Mark Vibart glared unbelievingly at the glittering star, tried to speak, but choked on the blood in his throat and died.

Just as twilight fell over the desert, Slade loaded the wounded prisoner onto a horse and set out on the long trail back to Griffin. . . .

There was a meeting of the cattlemen in Griffin on Saturday night, but a somewhat different meeting than had been planned. Sitting in the hall with the cowmen were a dozen and more of the grangers, rounded up by Sheriff Curtis to hear what Walt Slade had to say.

"Yes, Vibart killed young Chet Nelson," Slade told them. "Killed him because he stumbled onto what Vibart had discovered long ago. Out there in the desert, on land held by the grangers, is one of the biggest and richest deposits of gypsum I ever saw or heard tell of. It's worth a fortune."

"Gypsum!" exclaimed Bull Leonard. "What in tarnation is that good for?"

"Plenty," Slade told him. "It has great commercial value. It's used to make wall board, roof tile, plaster, and so on. The translucent, finely granular sort known as alabaster is made into boxes, vases, lamps, ornamental carvings and jewelry."

"And we always figgered that desert land weren't worth shucks!" said a granger.

"Can't always tell about things from the first look," Slade said, and smiled. "Vibart knew what the stuff was worth and set out to get it. If he could cause the cowmen to chase the grangers off their holdin's, he knew he could get the land for practically nothin', and that's what he aimed to do. All the time he was makin' considerable easy money out of his wideloopin's. A smart hombre, all right. Just a mite too smart for his own good."

He paused to roll a cigarette, while the room hummed with comment that stilled when Slade held up his hand.

"Now I've got a suggestion to make," he said, addressing the grangers. "It will take money to develop them beds and get the product to market. Of course you fellers wouldn't have any trouble interestin' outside capital. Plenty of folks would be ready to put up the money for development. But I figger yuh can get the money yuh need right here. Leonard and the other cowmen have the money yuh'll need. If you fellers get together, yuh can keep all the profits right here at home. The income will give all of yuh a backlog against blizzards, bad growing years, and so on. What do yuh say?"

The grangers hummed together for a few minutes. Then the lanky Kentuckian who was their leader got slowly to his feet.

"Well," he said, "us fellers ain't got no objections." He looked inquiringly at Bull Leonard.

Leonard hesitated, then lumbered erect and held out a big paw.

"Yuh're from Kentucky, ain't yuh" he asked the granger. "Wonder if yuh ever heard tell of the McCoys back there? My ma was a McCoy from Kentucky."

"Must have been the daughter of old Nate McCoy of Moorehead," the granger replied as they shook hands. "I recollect hearin' that Nellie McCoy married a feller from Texas. Her ma was a Hogadorn, daughter of old Squire Hogadorn of Big Sandy, who sired State Senator Jim Hogadorn. He married—"

They were well into the "begats" when Slade and Sheriff Curtis left the hall for the lawman's office.

"And yuh say yuh was suspicious of Vibart even before yuh took that ride into the desert?" the sheriff asked, after they were comfortably seated. "How come yuh figgered him to be wearin' a blotted brand?"

"Well"—Slade smiled—'things had sort of narrowed down to Vibart or Bull Leonard for bein' responsible for the ruckus-raisin' hereabouts. I got curious about Vibart the first time I saw him—when he had that wring with that cowboy in the saloon. He showed to be a plumb salty hombre and sort of out of character for a cowtown storekeeper. He handled a gun gambler fashion and he had killer eyes. Of course at the time I didn't suspect him of anything. I was just curious. Then one or two little things showed up that made me wonder. Paint was one of 'em."

THE sheriff stared.

"Paint?" he repeated, puzzled.

"Uh-huh. Vibart sold the paint Leonard

used on his ranchhouse. The colors were red, green and yellow, and Vibart suggested how they should be used. He had an eye for color, all right. Well, the figures on that bison bone 'signboard' down by the edge of the desert had been put on with ordinary house paint, and the colors were red, green, and yellow. Not much to go on, but it made me think.

"Then there was the dynamite. It gave me quite a start when I saw that box of dynamite on Leonard's ranchhouse table, but I just couldn't give Leonard credit for a scheme like puttin' them dynamite sticks in my room. Leonard is plenty salty, but I figgered him for direct methods. And where would Leonard buy his dynamite? From Vibart's store, of co'hse. Which meant Vibart had dynamite ready to hand.

"But what really let Leonard out of the picture was somebody spreadin' that story to tip yuh off that I was *El Halcon.* If Leonard had recognized me as *El Halcon,* he would have come rarin' and chargin' to you with the information hisself. Right then I knew somebody with brains and imagination was doin' undercover work hereabouts. Somebody who knew my reputation and wanted to get rid of me. That let Leonard plumb outa the picture.

"There was another angle to the dynamite, too. Leonard owns most of the Center-Fire Saloon. If that dynamite had let go in my room, it would have plumb wrecked the buildin' and everything in it. Why would Leonard destroy his own valuable property?"

"Right," agreed the sheriff, "and mighty smart thinkin'. By the way, why did Vibart draw the pictures on that buffalo bone?"

Slade smiled and rolled another cigarette.

"The jigger with a hole in his shoulder yuh got locked up told me he come up from the south to take over the cows Vibart had hid out in the desert. That signboard was to direct him, and other jiggers to the hangout. He'll give yuh all the evidence yuh need, incidentally, to convict them two hellions yuh brought in from Vibart's hoss ranch.

"Of course," Slade concluded, "I never did have anything on Vibart that would have stood up in court. I had to find his hangout and lay a trap for him. Which I did."

He stood up, stretching his long arms above his head and smiling down at the old peace officer.

"Recollect me tellin' yuh mebbe yuh wouldn't have so many troubles after I left?" he remarked. "Well, I'm leavin' now. Captain Jim will have another little chore ready for me by the time I get back to the post."

The sheriff, decidedly free of troubles, watched him ride away through the moonlight, plucking the strings of his guitar and singing in his rich, glorious voice a love song of the range:

There's a long, gray trail in Texas,
Windin' westward to the sun,
A trail that I'll be ridin'
When the roundup days are done.

Ridin' where the sage is purple
And the leaves are turnin' gold,
And the frost is paintin' silver
Jewel-pictures on the mold.

Ridin', ridin' through the starlight,
With my bridle swingin' free,
To where a girl in Texas
Is a-waitin' just for me!

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I backed up against the bar and tried to look scared

TIN-STAR TRICK

By GUNNISON STEELE

Gun-shy Marshal Joe Waters hatches a scheme to drive a tinhorn out of town—and runs into a big surprise!

BEFORE I'd been in Ute Gap an hour I knew trouble was brewing. The town was mighty quiet, and men whispered in tight knots on the street and in the saloons. Pretty soon, as I sipped a mug of cold beer in the Red Barrel saloon, I found out what it was all about.

"Ben Thor and Marshal Joe Waters are meetin' in the street at sundown for a shoot-out," the fat barkeep told me. "Ben Thor's a tinhorn card-slick in the Tucson House down the street. Joe's the town marshal. They never did like each other, and when they both started courtin' old Shanty Cannon's red-haired minx of a daughter, Nancy, why things just naturally boiled over."

"Ain't somebody liable to get hurt?" I asked.

"They shore are, and it'll be Joe Waters. Too bad, too, because Joe's a fine, honest young gent. He's got nerve, but he ain't worth shucks with a gun, while Ben Thor's plenty fast. Ben's killed two men since he showed up here a year ago."

"Why don't the marshal just arrest this tinhorn and slam him in jail?"

"On what charge? Besides, Joe wouldn't do it if he could. He's got more pride than he has sense. Nancy Cannon picked him—and when Ben Thor found it out, that's when he called Joe yeller before the whole town and dared him to walk up the street to meet him at sundown. Joe Waters'd go out to meet him if he *knew* he'd get killed—which he will."

"Gun-fightin's bad," I said. "Just seein' blood makes me sick to my stummick."

"Then yuh better leave town, quick. In about an hour it'll be sundown—" The fat barkeep broke off, and whispered, "here

comes Marshal Joe Waters now!"

A man came between the batwings and crossed to the bar. He was a big, slab-bodied young hombre with square, brown features that were creased with worry. On his shirt-front was a marshal's badge. He ordered whisky.

He picked up the glass, and when he turned he bumped into my elbow, spilling some of the whisky. He swore, whirled and glared hard at me.

"Why in blazes don't yuh watch what yuh're doin'?" he barked.

I certainly didn't want any trouble with the law.

"I'm sorry, sir," I apologized. "It was an accident."

He looked me over then, and a freckled, towheaded kid of nineteen like me, dressed in dusty denims and floppy old hat and scuffed boots, must not have impressed him much. He nearly grinned when he looked at the old range six-shooter tied to my leg.

"Good thing it was," he growled. "If yuh wasn't just a button, mebbe I'd take a poke at yuh anyway."

"Yes, sir," I mumbled. "I didn't mean any harm."

"Reckon I'm kind of edgy, at that."

He seemed sorry for the way he'd acted. He insisted on buyin' me another beer, and I let him. As he took his second drink, Marshal Joe Waters kept lookin' at me kind of funny, and finally he whispered:

"Kid, bring yore drink over to this table. I want to talk to yuh—private."

WONDERING what his game was, I followed him over to a poker table at the back of the room and sat down. Besides us, only the barkeep and a couple of half-soused cowpokes were in the room.

Joe Waters leaned across the table.

"How'd yuh like to make twenty dollars, kid?" he asked.

"Honest money?" I questioned.

"Honest money. And yuh can earn it right quick."

I said I shore could use twenty dollars.

"What yuh want me to do?"

"I'm in a terrible jam, kid. At sundown I've got to go out and meet a killer named Ben Thor—"

"Yes, sir, I heard about that," I observed.

"Well, I've got to do it, but I know he'll kill me if I do." I could see this Joe Waters was worried sick. "I wouldn't have a chance. This Ben Thor is yeller clean through, but long as he knows he's not takin' any chances, it don't show. And he *knows* he can beat me—or thinks he does. If he wasn't absolutely shore, he wouldn't fight."

"I get it," I said, grinning. "Yuh got some scheme to make him show yeller, so yuh won't have to meet him. That right?"

"If yuh'll help me. That's how yuh earn twenty dollars."

"But what could I do?"

The marshal looked all about the room.

"I want yuh to be the Reno Kid!" he whispered.

That nearly floored me. I'd heard plenty about this Reno Kid, and so had everybody else in seven states. He was about my age, but he was a chain-lightning gunslinger and he'd killed half a dozen men, all in self-defense, he claimed. His stamping grounds were over in Nevada, and he'd never showed up here in Utah. There was a big bounty on his head, dead or alive.

"Run that one by again, mister," I said.

"Look, younker," the marshal said earnestly. "What I want yuh to do is this. You circulate about over town, drinkin' and talkin' big, and make it a point to wind up in the Tucson House Saloon where Ben Thor will be. Make some brags, and let it slip, accidental like, that yuh're the Reno Kid. Then I'll happen in, and jump yuh, and make yuh eat crow right there before Ben Thor. I'll chase yuh clean out of town."

"Then Ben Thor'll figure that anybody that's good enough to make the Reno Kid coyote is too good for him. That the ticket?"

"That's right. It's my only chance. Will yuh do it?"

I thought about it awhile. I didn't want to get mixed up in any gun-fight, but I needed that twenty dollars pretty bad.

"I'll do it," I agreed. "It might not work, so yuh better give me the twenty now!"

There was half a dozen saloons in town, and I made the rounds, drinkin' hard likker—what I didn't pour into the cuspidors—and talkin' big. By the time I got to the Tucson House news had gone on ahead that the hell-on-wheels Reno Kid was loose in town and lookin' for raw meat to chaw on.

The Tucson House was the biggest saloon in town, and it was pretty well crowded. My head had begun to spin a little, and I kind of swaggered—like I figured the Reno Kid would do—as I crossed to the shiny bar.

"Whisky," I said, "the meanest yuh got!"

Everything had got mighty quiet, and I could see the barkeep's hand shakin' as he shoved out a bottle and glass. I poured and took a swallow. Then I flung the glass to the floor.

"Yuh call that stuff whisky?" I yelled. "None of that hawg-swill for the Reno Kid. Give me somethin' with an army mule kick and a rattlesnake bite!"

The barkeep nearly broke a leg gettin' to another bottle. I poured, and turned to look about the room. Right quick, everybody seemed to be powerful busy at somethin'. It wasn't any trouble to pick out Ben Thor. He sat alone at a table at the back of the room. He was a tall, blond hombre with slender hands, and eyes like yellow chips of ice. He wore a fancy pearl-handled .45, tied low. Bully and killer was written all over him.

When he saw me lookin' at him, Thor's eyes shifted. Then I figured Joe Waters had been right about him being yellow.

I aimed to earn that twenty dollars. So I downed my drink and hitched at my old gun-belt.

"Ain't there ever any excitement in this town?" I crowed. "I ain't killed a man in over a week, and I'm man-hongry. Reckon if there's any badge-toter in this hole, he's heard I was here and done took to the brush. Yes, sir, lawmen is my meat—I eat 'em blood raw, badge and all!"

IT WAS just about then that Joe Waters come bargin' between the batwings. He come straight on across the room toward me, and if I hadn't known what was up I'd have sworn he was a bounty-hunter on the kill. His hand was close to his gun and he certainly looked like he meant business. You could have heard a pin drop in the room as he stopped close to me.

"Hello, Reno Kid," he said, cool-like. "Kind of off yore stompin' ground, ain't yuh?"

"My stompin' ground's wherever I put my boots down," I declared. "And can't no two-bit marshal tell me where to put 'em!"

"Look again, Kid. Ain't recognized me yet, have yuh?"

I played 'er right up to the hilt. I looked close at him, and then I stepped back and let my mouth kind of drop open.

"J-Joe Waters!" I stuttered. "I didn't know yuh was roddin' this town."

"Now yuh know it! Remember Spanish Springs, Kid?"

"Yeah, I remember it. But I didn't know—"

"At Spanish Springs, when I took yore gun away from yuh and booted yuh out of town, I said if our trails ever crossed again yuh'd have to shoot it out with me. Remember?"

"Yuh got no right to—"

Joe Waters stepped forward, quick, and slapped me hard across the face. Then he stepped back, kind of hunkered down, and said, "Draw, Reno Kid—I'm givin' yuh an even break!"

A loud gasp went up over the room, and boots scuffed the floor as the spectators scrambled to get out of line of fire. They expected me to kill Joe Waters.

That slap made me kind of mad, and I started to grab for my old six-shooter. Then I remembered that it was all an act. I remembered the jam Joe Waters was in, and a red-haired girl who would maybe cry her pretty eyes out if he got killed. So I acted like I figured the Reno Kid would act if he was here, and if he was really afraid of this clumsy marshal.

I backed up against the bar. I licked my lips and tried to look scared. I knew my face was pale because I was mad.

"I—I got no quarrel with yuh, Waters," I said hoarsely. "Yuh beat me once, and I know yuh could do it again. I don't aim to commit suicide!"

"Still yeller," he sneered. "I can't gun yuh down if yuh won't fight. You got ten seconds to get out of this room, Kid. Ten minutes to get clean out of town. And don't come back!"

I got out of there, fast. But I didn't head for the livery where my buckskin was. I could see the sun was nearly down. I figured the marshal would want to have a showdown with Ben Thor, right now, and I wanted to see the end of it.

I circled into an alley and came up to an open window. And I saw I'd guessed right. Marshal Joe Waters had stepped over close to Ben Thor, and Thor was on his feet.

"All right, Thor!" Waters spat. "Yuh've been ridin' me a long time. I went out of my way to stop a killin', but yuh wanted a showdown, and here it is. No use goin' into the street—this can be settled right here!"

Ben Thor didn't look arrogant or confident now. His face looked kind of slack and old and had beads of sweat on it. I could see he was just plain yellow scared.

"No hurry about this, Joe," the tinhorn mumbled. "Mebbe I made a mistake—mebbe

we could talk this over—"

"Nothin' to talk over!" Joe Waters snapped. "If both of us stay in this town, one of us has got to be underground. Draw, or ride out—quick!"

THOR wasn't having any of it. Sweat trickled off his chin and splattered on the floor. He was shaking like a leaf in the wind.

He stammered, "I—I'll ride, Joe!" and he stumbled across the room and out the door like a drunken man. He got onto a horse at a tie-rack and rode fast out of town.

I knew that was no place for me. I backed away from the window, went out of the alley and along the street to the livery. I saddled my buckskin, and was just climbing into the saddle when I saw Marshal Joe Waters hurrying along the street toward me. He was grinning like he felt pretty good.

"Whoa up, kid," he said. "What's yore hurry?"

"Yuh told me to leave town, didn't yuh?"

"Shore, but that was just part of the act. Yuh can stay here from now on, if yuh want to. Yuh sure earned that twenty, and I'd like to buy you the biggest steak in town besides."

"Ain't got time," I said. "I got some business off yonder."

"Anyway, I'm obliged to yuh." Joe Waters was still grinning. "It was a slick trick, us makin' that gun-greased tinhorn think you was the Reno Kid. When he saw me manhandle yuh and make yuh eat crow, it finished him. Hope I didn't slap yuh too hard, younker. I had to make it look real."

"I can stand it," I said. "Yeah, it was a purty slick trick. A good joke, too, though I ain't quite sure who it's on."

"Why ain't yuh shore?"

"It just happens, marshal, that I *am* the Reno Kid!"

I never saw a face turn paler or a mouth drop open wider.

He must have swallowed a lot of the dust I raised as I left Ute Gap.

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

SALUDOS, amigos, here are five more questions tuh test yore knowledge of the West. Each correct answer counts 20% and 60% or over is passing. If yuh kin do better than that, yuh're shore a top-hand. See if yuh kin get the plumb proper replies without referrin' tuh our answers on page 97, and let us know how yuh made out, won't yuh?

1. What is the "dead man's hand" in draw poker, and how did it become known as such?
2. What famous Western outlaw was born in New York City?
3. What is a "rep."?
4. What does the word "rodeo" mean?
5. What man named a Western town after his favorite pin-up girl, whom he had never seen?

Moose swung, caught the drummer on the point of the chin

DON'T SLIP YOUR HOBBLES

By FRANK MORRIS

CHAPTER I

Moose and Coyote

DAVE BRYSON knew there was something wrong the minute he stepped into the livery barn. Nothing a man could tie down and name. Just there, all around him, like a cold black mist in the shadowy silence.

He moved warily toward his team. They pricked their sharp little ears at him, but they were not eating.

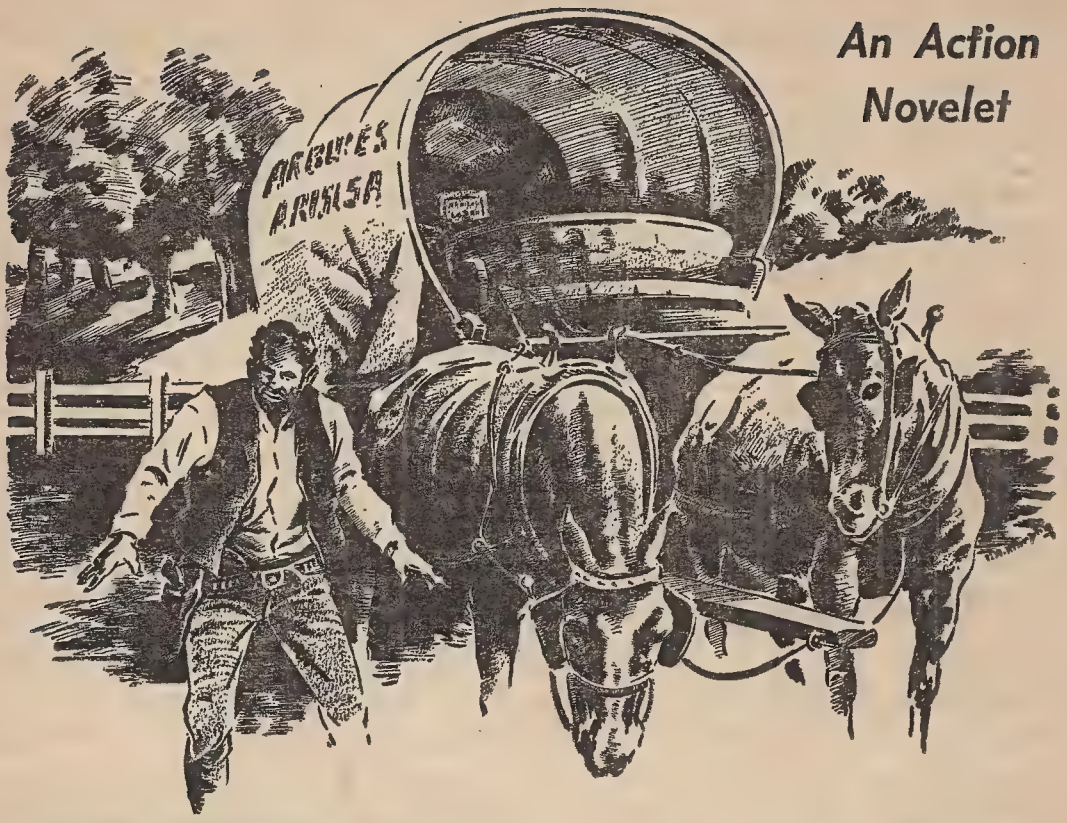
He saw it then. The bloody, crazily twisted body of the hostler, sprawled in the empty stall next to his trim-legged duns. All the wild tales of the West, tales that the boys back in the District Office at Saint Jo had hurrahed him with, leaped at him now with new meaning. An icy chill splashed over his lean young frame, brought sweat popping out on his smooth-shaven upper lip.

The old hostler was dead, his neck broken, his face a beaten, featureless pulp.

Dave Bryson shoved erect, wiped his blood-smeared palm on the plank side of the stall. Carefully he brushed the stall bedding from his new cheviot trousers and thumbed the hardshell derby back on his slicked-down black hair.

A jumble of confused thoughts pushed at him. A sick feeling gathered in his stomach.

An Action Novelet



Planning a getaway after committing a brutal crime, a pair of owlhoots commandeer a traveling salesman's wagon, but discover their road's rough when they must contend with Dave Bryson!

His silk shirt was suddenly sticking to him like a second skin. A coffee drummer had no business with—murder!

His first impulse was to get away, to put distance between himself and that dead man. He wanted to get out of this eerie, shadowy place, out into the sunlight, the fresh air, where he could breathe.

He glanced again at the dead hostler. No, running away would do no good. He must tell the sheriff. Or at least get a doctor. The doctor could notify the sheriff.

It was plain that the hostler had not been kicked to death by a horse. There was no horse in the stall in which the body lay. The man's neck had been twisted until it had snapped. Twisted by human hands. Only a man of great physical strength could have done it.

Dave's straining ears caught a tiny trickle of sound. It could have been a spur chain, or maybe a big sunburst rowel, touching ground.

He whirled around, facing the rear of the barn, his gray eyes wide in his tense, white face. On the wall, high up near the ceiling, a big batlike shadow moved and cut strange patterns on the cobwebby boards. Great black wings. They folded and slid with startling suddenness toward the barn floor.

A FLASH of understanding knifed into the Arbuckle drummer's mind. The thin shaft of sunlight cutting into the barn was clear again. Like a trapped lobo, Dave Bryson turned to the dark corner. He was late for anything more than a swift, wide-eyed stare.

"Stand hitched, dude," the man who stood there rasped out, a big, barrel-chested ape of a man.

He straightened under the black mouth of the loft opening over the feed alley, leaped

with his long legs over the manger into Dave Bryson's stall.

Bryson's alert gaze swiveled from the stranger's huge hands to the dead man at his feet. His tongue thickened against the roof of his mouth. It wouldn't move. He couldn't find the air to form the words crowding his taut throat.

"Just lift them there purty white paws, dude, and ground-rein them fancy yeller shoes, or I'll blow yuh apart."

Bryson took a backward step, felt his shoulders touch the stall partition. His hands came up slowly. He was not armed. He never carried a gun. One wouldn't have done him any good now, anyway. This big ape had killed the hostler. At least, he had the physical strength to have done it. Bryson could hardly pull his eyes from those big hairy hands.

The big man moved in close. His great hands patted over Dave Bryson's pockets. His chuckle was an ugly sound. Then he stepped back.

"You and me got business," he growled. He lifted his long face, his little eyes peering over the drummer's head. "This the feller, Chet?" he called.

Bryson heard the soft fall of boots, the clink of spurs. The sound was loud now, and he twisted his head. The man he saw now was the tough-looking little fellow in puncher clothes who had been tailing him all forenoon, while he had made his rounds of Blackwing's stores and eating houses, on his Arbuckle coffee route.

"That's him, Moose," the pale-eyed little puncher said, rounding up beside the big man. "Tagged him all mornin'. Found out from the Chinese eatin' house, where he took an order for some of his Arbuckle, that he's leavin' for Greenfield directly."

"Yeah," the big outlaw growled. "I seen that tarp-covered wagon rig of his'n out there in the yard."

Dave Bryson's eyes narrowed. "Moose," the cold-eyed gunman had called this big long-nosed ape. Fear prickled up over the drummer's stiff white collar. He was recalling that a man named Moose Shattuck was the outlaw who had blown Sunderson's safe last night, killed the watchman, and made off with close to twelve thousand dollars in cash. That was the reason Blackwing's lawman had pulled most of the townsmen into his posse and was out scouring the country.

"Put 'em down, dude," Moose Shattuck ordered gruffly. "You ain't heeled. But play safe. Don't try to slip your hobbles."

Bryson lowered his hands. Danger pressed in on him. He could feel it, but the paralyzing fear of the first moment was gone. He checked his racing thoughts and studied Shattuck with level gaze.

The big outlaw stood a good six feet four in his high-heeled boots and tall hat. Twin six-guns sagged at his thick middle. He was well-named. The long nose, red and bulbous at the end, hung down over his meaty lips. A Cyrano de Bergerac in a cowboy outfit. A little grin momentarily twisted the drummer's lips at the thought. Small black eyes pinched in close to low bridge of that long nose; hard, glittering, evil eyes. Moose Shattuck was a killer. A ruthless, powerful man, a road agent and outlaw.

Little Chet would be Shattuck's silent partner. Chet Garman, a bantam rooster. The look-out, folks said, who cased a town for his big pard and smoothed the way. Never an actual participant in the robberies and shootings—or so legend had it. At least his face had never been posted. He was slick enough to remain in the background, guessed at but unknown.

But those washed-out blue eyes weren't harmless. The small, rock-solid features gave away nothing. Dave Bryson didn't like what he saw. Those restless, small-boned hands, never far from the .45 Colt or the throwing knife heeling up from a boot-top, were acquainted with violence.

Bryson clamped his lips tight, watched Chet Garman hitch his duns to the light runabout in the yard and pull it up close to the barn door. Shattuck pulled a heavy canvas sack from a manger and tossed it into the rear of the covered rig. He motioned to the drummer to get up on the spring seat.

"Get up there, feller," he said, waving a six-gun. "Yuh're drivin', Yuh're takin' us right out of this gun-trap."

DAVE BRYSON knew now what it was all about. He was their surest means of escape from this law-corraled town. They would hide their swag and themselves in his tarp-covered wagon. They had killed the hostler to close his mouth.

They would have killed the coffee drummer, too, only they needed him up there on the seat, driving. When they were through with him, they would give him the same treatment they had given the hostler. They

would close his mouth, too.

The outlaws' plan was almost sure fire. Shattuck was no fool, and could see that. With "Arbuckle's Ariosa," printed in big red letters on the ribbed sides of the canvas wagon cover, with the Arbuckle drummer up on the seat handling the reins, those two killers would be hidden from all eyes. They could slip right through any line of possemen the lawman might have surrounding the town and get clear, to Greenfield. There they could catch the stage, and that would be the last of it.

Or would it? The color washed back into Dave Bryson's smooth face.

"Like blazes!" he said, in quick anger. "I'm not driving you two polecats clear of this mess. I don't want anything to do with it."

Moose took his big foot off the rear wheel hub. His grin was an oily smirk.

"Lis'en to this here fancy pants," he called to Garman.

Suddenly he shot out a long arm, plucked the lavender cup of the pasque-flower in Dave's buttonhole and crushed its thin petals in his fist. He threw the mashed flower at Dave's unblinking eyes.

"Big and tough, ain't yuh?" Moose sneered.

"No!" Dave Bryson said hotly. "But I won't be a party to killing and robbery. You've taken my rig. I can't do anything about that. But I don't have to drive it for you, help you escape."

"Oh, yuh don't?"

"No!" Dave Bryson was backing up against the barn.

Moose smiled, a crafty slow-moving expression on his heavy face. He pounced like a great cat, his huge fist lashed out.

Bryson ducked, but not quite fast enough. The outlaw's horny knuckles sliced across his cheek, tore the skin like a dull knife.

Dave Bryson felt the blood trickle down his face and turn in, warm and salty, at his mouth. Then those big fists came in again, fast, batted the drummer's head up against the barn.

Bryson chopped in under Shattuck's guard, sank a fist into the big man's paunch. It jolted Moose. He roared. He swung, caught the drummer on the point of the chin, sent him reeling back into the barn, flat on his back.

"Now get up on them button shoes, purty man, and crawl onto that seat before I lose my temper," Moose growled.

CHAPTER II

Brain Against Brawn

DAVE BRYSON got to his feet, rubbed his jaw. A shadow seemed to flick over his face. It became an expressionless mask. Inside, he felt the bitterness of despair. It became a powerful vise that clutched his heart. It felt like it would squeeze the very life out of him.

Then Chet Garman spoke.

"Hold up on that, Moose," the smaller man said, leaping from the rear of the runabout. "Ain't yuh got no brains a-tall? Now yuh got him all mussed up. What'll folks think, seein' him duded up this mornin', and now lookin' like a bum? They's bound to be some folks along the main drag, and them possemen. They'll ask questions about that. Specially that gimlet-eyed tinstar."

Bryson's breath came easier. They wouldn't kill him yet—not as long as they needed him. Moose's little eyes crawled over Dave's rumpled clothing and bloody cheek.

"Reckon yuh're plumb right, Chet," he grunted. "But I got somethin' here that'll fix that up."

Moose reached to a back pocket, pulled out a half-filled pint of whisky. He yanked out the cork with his big yellow teeth, splashed the rotgut on the drummer's shoulders and vest. He cupped his hand, poured the heel of the bottle into it and smeared it over the salesman's face.

Bryson quivered like a race horse at the starting line, but Chet's six-gun boring into his ribs held his fast.

"Now folks'll know why yuh look like the tail end of a argyment," Moose laughed. "Yuh been on a quick drunk, savvy? That's yore story, if we get stopped. Yuh been celebratin' a big order."

Bitterness swept over Dave Bryson. In ten minutes he was due at the Wallace General Store on the edge of town. What would Kathy Wallace think of him now? His gray eyes were like cold steel, stabbing at the two gunmen.

But there was nothing else to do. Even if he got out of this alive, he still would have to convince the sheriff that he wasn't in cahoots with these outlaws, that he wasn't a member of the gang, but had been forced to help these men escape.

Then there were his customers. News like this traveled fast and far. He might convince the sheriff, escape a hanging at the hands of the posse. But many of his customers would look down their noses at him. It would hurt his business.

He settled himself on the seat, felt the dig of a gun in his back. He scooped up the lines, snapped life into the team. He kept thinking of the girl, of Kathy. Maybe she, too, like the others, would think he was working with the outlaws. He drew a deep breath, let it out slowly.

Surely there was a way out of this mess. If he could only think. But the more he thought, the more jumbled became his ideas. One thing was certain: he couldn't overcome men like Moose with physical violence. He would have to use his brain. His cunning.

He drove down the side street into the main section of town, headed out the long, wide main street toward the county road that led to Greenfield. It was the closest town on the stage line west from Pierre.

He had met Kathy Wallace and her father on his first trip through this territory three months ago. Since then, the pretty red-headed girl had filled his thoughts most of the time. He had reasons to think she liked him, too.

He wrinkled his nose in disgust at the whisky odor that came from his clothes. Maybe she would change her mind now. Or her father would change it for her.

Old Clem Wallace was out on the board walk, waving as Dave Bryson neared the general store.

"What's that old coot wavin' his flipper about?" growled Moose Shattuck, shoving his head up from under the coffee sacks that covered him.

"One of my stops," Bryson explained. "He's going to give me an order. Met him down in the barbershop this morning."

Moose twisted around to Chet Garman, and there was a buzz of talk there for a moment.

Bryson gulped. That's what would hurt worst about this whole fantastic thing that was happening to him. Never could he make old man Wallace believe such a story, that he was being held at the point of a gun while he took the storekeeper's order. Forced to conceal two outlaws in his wagon. Aid and abet in their escape.

Dave Bryson knew he wouldn't believe such a yarn himself. And when old Wallace smelled that whisky, that would be the end!

"All right," Shattuck said finally, poking his head up again. "Yuh can stop. Reckon the store keeper'd think it was funny if yuh didn't. But Chet's goin' with yuh, drummer. If yuh make a try to tell that old jasper about us, Chet'll shoot you dead. Him, too."

GARMAN slipped up beside Dave Bryson on the seat. When the wagon pulled up in front of the store, he got down right behind the salesman, hat pulled low over pale eyes, thumbs hooked in gunbelt.

Bryson had a little yellow paper bag of coffee in his hand, a pound bag put out for the trade. In it there was supposed to be a stick of striped peppermint candy. Dave saw little Bobby Wallace, Kathy's brother, running out behind his father. The youngster's eyes were shining, reaching for the coffee sack.

Dave Bryson rubbed his handkerchief over his face, tried to put on a smile. The little boy grabbed the sack, dug a grimy fist into the coffee beans in search of the candy he knew should be there.

Bryson was tense, tight as the pair of new bump-last shoes on his feet. Sweat moistened his brow. Purposely he had picked up a sack from which the candy had already been extracted. He had given the stick of candy to a little girl along the route. There was a wild plan rattling around in his head. It might work. At least it would be a try.

Any chance, no matter how slim, was worth a try, if it would get him out of the clutches of these two killers.

Killers! That thought sent another fear prickling up Bryson's spine. They wouldn't hesitate a second to kill old Wallace. "Him, too," Moose had said. Or little Bobbie. Not if they thought that either might interfere with their escape.

He would have to be careful. Doubly careful. Again Dave Bryson mopped his brow. His tongue moistened lips that were suddenly dry.

He turned and hurried into the store, the little gunman and old Wallace following him. Inside he stopped so suddenly Garman almost ran into him.

Kathy Wallace stood there at the counter.

She was slender, this Kathy, and held herself proudly. It was natural, as was the almost haughty tilt of her red-haired head. Her tight-bodied gray dress flounced in voluminous folds about the small slippers that peeped out so demurely. Her face was

like a heart, the skin tanned but smooth, nose slightly tilted, lips soft and cool and red.

Her hazel eyes were on Dave Bryson, wide with wonder. Then her little nose wrinkled.

"Dave Bryson!" she gasped. "You're . . . What happened?"

He swallowed hard. This was what he had dreaded.

"Had an accident," he began.

Chet Garman cut him off.

"Yeah, he had an accident, all right," the banty gunman blurted. "He's just drunk, gal. Plain drunk. Reckon yuh better give him yore coffee order, and let him come along with me before he falls on his face again."

"Your face, Dave!" Kathy whispered. "And —and . . . there's whisky on your breath thick enough to cut!"

Anger darkened her eyes. A little spot of color glowed in each pale cheek. Dave Bryson had never seen her angry before. It only seemed to make her more beautiful, more desirable.

"Kathy, let me explain," he said quickly. "I'm not drunk. Don't listen to this—this—"

Garman's laugh was a brittle thing that cut into the strained silence. Bryson knew his face was red. He could feel it burning, knew it made him look drunker. His glance cut to the little gunman.

"You didn't have to say that," he snapped.

Old Clem Wallace whirled around by the counter and faced Bryson. His spectacles slid down onto his nose and his eyes lanced at the drummer. He was a straight-laced old man, a deacon in Blackwing's church, a member of the Town Council. The shaggy ledges of his brow bristled at Dave.

"Drunk? Yuh mean yuh come in here wantin' my business, to talk to my gal—drunk?" The oldster's voice was shrill with his anger. He folded his bony arms across his chest.

"Listen, Mr. Wallace," Bryson tried again. "I'm not drunk. I haven't been drinking."

Chet Garman stepped around so that he could look into Dave's face. His restless right hand was close to the black handle of his six-gun. His gaze fastened on the drummer like that of an angry snake's.

"Yuh said enough!" he snarled.

With a little gasp, Kathy turned and ran behind the counter, quick tears springing into her eyes. Bryson took a step toward her and stopped. She was at the rear door when she spun around.

"Get out of here, Dave Bryson!" she ordered, her voice cold. "You're just a—a tinhorn sport. I don't ever want to see you again."

"Bryson," thundered the old man, "I promised I'd give yuh an order. I ain't never yet gone back on my word. Another thing, yuh're sellin' Arbuckle coffee. But it'll be the last yuh sell here, young feller. No cheap drunk is goin' to call on me or my gal. Now trot out yore order book and start writin'."

DAVE BRYSON groaned deep in his chest. He had known it would be like this, that he would not even have a chance to explain. Old Clem didn't want any explanation. He believed what he saw. Dave pulled out his pencil and book, began flipping pages until he came to a blank one. He inserted the carbon, filled in the storeman's name and address.

"Six sacks," Wallace said, voice flat. "Six hundred-pound sacks. And a gross of them yaller one-pound paper bags with the stick candy in 'em. I'll send my check by mail. And don't think I won't tell them Arbuckle folks what I think of 'em, sendin' a salesman like you out here among decent folks. Yuh're a disgrace to the trade. Now, you and yore gun-hung pard get out of here!"

Garman's shifty eyes swiveled from the storeroom at the back, to old Clem, to Dave, and out onto the boardwalk. Nothing got by him. He spun around without a word and moved toward the door.

Bryson wrote up the order, marked the lower line for Wallace's signature, and held out the book. He threw a quick glance at the gunman. Hurriedly he pulled the book to him, scribbled under the signature line:

Moose Shattuck is hid in my wagon

That was all he had time for. Wallace grabbed the book out of his hand, slapped down his cramped signature. He was so angry he didn't see what Bryson had written. Dave could tell that by the way he shoved the book back at him and pointed toward the door.

Dave Bryson's heart sank down into his white silk socks. If the storekeeper didn't see that warning and get word to the sheriff, it would mean Shattuck's escape with the bank money, and—the drummer gulped—

maybe his own life. Moose and Chet wouldn't set him free, once they got to Greenfield. They would kill him, and so close his mouth for good.

WALLACE stepped to the door and yanked it open.

Bryson shrugged and stepped out on the walk, ran right smack into little Bobby Wallace holding up the bag of coffee.

"Ain't nary candy in there," the little five-year-old said, wailing. "Mr. Dave, yuh got to open 'nother sack. There ain't no—"

"Get inside, young 'un!" shouted old Wallace. "You don't have to ask the likes of this here no-good for candy."

"But you ain't got no candy with purty stripes like his, Pa," the little fellow said, beginning to cry.

Dave Bryson hurried to the runabout, and then fished out two more sacks of the Ariosa.

"Here, Bobby," he called, "come get these. One for you and one for your sister." He tore open both sacks. "Yep, candy in both of 'em."

Folding back the top, he slipped the crumpled original of his coffee order in one of the sacks, held them out to the kid.

"This one is for you," he said. "And this one is for your sister." He handed the little fellow the sack with the order stuffed into it. "Don't forget to give it to her, and I'll bet this new penny she'll give you the candy in her sack, too."

"Hurry up, yuh dang slick-ear," snarled Garman, coming up with the wagon. "We ain't got all day."

Doubt seized Dave Bryson as he watched Bobby run into the store behind his father. No one could tell what a candy-hungry kid would do. He might decide to take both sticks of candy without telling his sister. If he did, it stood to reason that he wouldn't show the girl the sack of coffee that was meant for her.

Clem Wallace was too angry to bother to look at the carbon copy of the order that had been left on the counter. If he did happen to glance at it, he probably would crumple it up and toss it in a drawer so it wouldn't remind him of Dave Bryson.

"A candy-hungry kid and a teetotaler!" Bryson muttered. "My chances sure stand low."

He crawled up into the seat and slapped his team on down the road.

CHAPTER III

Drive to Doom

A SICKLE MOON threw pale light over the rolling range and the round gray top of the coffee wagon as it drew up beside the gun guard on the road.

Shattuck's words of warning still rang in Bryson's ears, and he could feel the sharp prod of the outlaw's gun in his back as he sawed his lathered team to a halt. He blinked in the flare of the match the lone guard held up to his face.

"Arbuckle, huh?" the posseman grunted, reading the big letters on the tarp. "Now if yuh just had some of them beans all boiled up into hot java—" the man chuckled.

Dave Bryson stared into the fellow's leathery face. He was a cowman, and had a rifle cradled over the pommel of his saddle.

"Ain't seen a big long-nosed jasper called Moose Shattuck, have yuh?" he asked, easing a lean hip in the hull. "He cleaned out Sunderson's Bank in Blackwing, if yuh ain't heard."

Bryson's mouth opened—and clamped shut as Moose's sixgun prodded his back bone.

"No," he said. "No."

"Move on," whispered Chet Garman.

Bryson lifted his reins and clucked to his horses. The posseman's cigarette glowed red in the dark. Then it was lost behind.

"Another mile or two, pull up," Shattuck ordered. "That warn't too close. But that tinstar might have more men along somewheres. So we're goin' to get this bank money out of sight. Savvy?"

Dave Bryson nodded, eyes on the sharp ears of the duns. Never in his twenty-two years had he felt so helpless, such a tenderfoot.

At a curve in the road near a clump of silverberry, Moose called a halt and leaped from the rear of the wagon. Garman followed, and the two outlaws pulled out one of the coffee-filled sacks. Moose cut the string, dumped a fourth of the beans down a badger hole beside the ruts of the road.

"Now, by dang!" he grunted. He lifted out the sack of bank money, wedged it down into the remaining coffee in the sack. "Anybody stops us again an' starts smellin' around, they won't see this *dinero*. Not that any jasper's goin' to get past my sixes, but this

stake is worth playin' safe for."

He tied the sack again, put it back in the wagon, then crawled inside.

"'Tain't more'n fifteen miles to Greenfield from here, dude," Garman said. "Let them hosses take it easy and we'll make it into town and the stage by sunup."

Bryson had his foot on the sideboard of the wagonbed. It would take but a second to leap from the slowly moving rig, vanish into the dark. What if Moose or Chet did shoot at him? If he was fast—and lucky—he could dodge. They couldn't notch him clearly in the dark. He didn't owe Blackwing anything, or Sunderson's Bank, either, for that matter.

But the Company! Arbuckle was a crackerjack outfit to work for. They wouldn't think much of a drummer who just pulled stakes in the face of trouble. Arbuckle's believed in good will, wanted their representatives to uphold their good name.

Too, if he ran away, he never could prove to Kathy Wallace that he hadn't been drunk. He cared a lot what that pretty redhead thought. Why, he had even sold himself twenty pounds of coffee last month, just so he would make the side trip to Blackwing look necessary, and perhaps take Kathy to a dance.

"Pull over to the side of the road," Shattuck ordered suddenly. "There's somebody a-comin' a-skyhootin'."

Dave Bryson twisted around in his seat. He could see the black outline of the two outlaws moving around back there on their hands and knees. He caught a gleam of light on a gun barrel.

He could hear the approaching pound of a running horses hoofs. Whoever it was, was coming fast.

The drummer poked his head out, to look back along the side of the canvas wagon cover. He choked off the yell that leaped to his mouth as the rider angled out to come even with the duns.

Kathy Wallace, in levis and man's shirt! The girl's red hair was shining darkly in the pale yellow light of the moon.

"Kathy!" Bryson shouted.

Shattuck was raising up beside Dave on the seat. He had his .45 level, was aiming at the girl. A crash of thunder broke by the salesman's ear. Red flame spurted from the wagon. Kathy screamed, vanished from Dave Bryson's horror-filled eyes as his duns spooked and tore down the road.

"You long-nosed hyena!" Bryson shouted at Moose. "You've killed her! You've killed a girl!" His fist grazed the big outlaw's jaw.

But Moose was ready for that. He clamped a big paw down on Dave's neck.

"Shut up!" he snarled. "Grab them ribbons before them crowbaits tip us over. I didn't shoot no woman. And even if I did, what yuh goin' to do about it? I'm lookin' out for myself, first and last."

"You skunk!" Bryson raged, and swung at the man again.

His blow missed in the dark. Then Chet Garman was pressing something sharp into the middle of his back.

"Scoop up them lines, or I'll push this knife clear through yuh," Garman gritted in his ear.

DAVE BRYSON froze. He could feel the sharp steel bite into his hide and the warm blood trickle. Moose grabbed the lines, jerked and hauled until he got the frigtened team back to a lope.

"Tap him on the head, Chet," Moose ripped out.

He threw a wide grin at the bantam outlaw as he saw Garman raise his six-gun.

"Not too hard, though, yuh little devil," Shattuck chuckled. "Don't need to overplay yore hand just 'cause yuh don't like pilgrims."

Dave Bryson saw the barrel lift and slice toward him. A curse ripped from his lips, faded into a deep sigh as the long blue barrel smashed on his skull. A bright light burst in his brain. The night became a huge black void that swallowed him up. . . .

Dawn was a pale gray in the east, prying at the soft purple mist, when Dave Bryson came out of it. The moisture-filled air was heavy in his nose. He breathed it in, its coolness a sharp tang on his dry tongue.

His head hurt. The side of his cheek where Moose had first hit him, was as stiff as a board. His body had swayed over against the foremost rib of the wagon top when Chet had buffaloed him. There he had remained all through the night.

For a time, he couldn't move. Then he put up a hand to the blood-encrusted knob over his ear.

Slumped in that uncomfortable position, with the reek of blood and sweat in his nostrils, Bryson felt his stomach knot and crawl. He fought down a feeling of nausea. His brow was beaded with sweat. It gathered in

damp rivulets, ran down his face, dampened the back of his neck.

"And that's just the start of it, slick-ear," big Moose growled, hunched up over the dash, staring grimly down the road. "There's Greenfield just ahead."

Bryson pulled himself up on the seat. He groaned a time or two. Then the horror of the past night burst anew on him, and he was staring from chill eyes at Shattuck beside him, at Chet Garman stretched out on the sacks of coffee.

"Turn around and pull yore lip over them pretty white choppers," Chet said coldly.

Bryson's face was a white mask.

"Curse you!" he said. "Curse you! You'll pay, both of you. You'll pay for killing Kathy Wallace." His voice was thick with hate.

Moose Shattuck's long nose pushed toward him.

"You keep that up, feller, and I'll stop yore clock for keeps. See that town ahead? That's Greenfield. We're drivin' right on through, to the stage station. Clear to the other side of town. You take these ribbons and slap up them hosses. And if yuh let out one peep—to anybody—by dang, I'll blow yuh into a dozen pieces."

"You'll do that, anyway," Dave said, and picked up the reins.

Moose stared at him for a moment. There was no mercy in the man's hard eyes. As well as if Moose had spoken the words, Bryson knew what was in store for him, what this man intended to do with him when the drummer had served the outlaw's purpose. The drummer was aware that he knew too much to be permitted to live.

Moose growled something under his breath, and crawled back beside Garman.

All right, Bryson thought, he would drive them to the stage. But it wouldn't end there. There would be a way out of this. A way to corral these two killers.

He was new to the West, but he was a grown man. No inhuman buzzards like these two men could get away with what they had done. Dave flexed his arms and legs. He could still move and get around.

He was remembering the bank money. They would take that with them, would have to load it on the stage and weigh it in. A sack of coffee couldn't go as baggage. And any lying they did about it wouldn't hide the coffee smell.

Bryson drove the tired team down the center of the main street, watching the walks and stores as he rattled past.

It was too early in the morning to hope that Greenfield's fat old marshal, Lard James, would be up and on duty. He did see Sam Cotter, the barkeep at the Old Keg Saloon, out on the front walk, sweeping up. But the saloon man merely waved a hand at the drummer and went back to his chores.

There were maybe ten or twelve merchants in town who knew Dave Bryson. They would help him if they were aware of the mess he was in. But town men wouldn't be much help against killers.

BRYSON wound the lines about the whip-socket and turned around to look at his two passengers.

"There's your stage station," he said flatly, pointing at the shack fronting on the boardwalk.

Moose glared at him, peered through the rear opening.

"Get down, then, and come around back here," he ordered. The big ape pulled an old stem-winder from a pocket and read the time. "We got near half an hour before the north-bound stage, if she's on time," he said. "You tote this here sack of coffee with the *dinero* inside that office. I'll be right behind yuh. Savvy?"

Bryson savvied. One move out of the way, and the outlaw would blast him. There was too much at stake to hope for any other kind of treatment.

Slowly, dragging out his movements, Dave got down and stretched his legs.

As he came around the rear end of the rig, Chet Garman dropped lightly to the road. He was like a cat in his easy actions. He moseyed into the stage station office and Bryson heard him speak to someone inside.

Moose held out the heavy sack, balanced it on Bryson's shoulder, and leaped down to hold it steady.

"Not one word out of yuh," he cautioned.

Chet met them in the doorway, crooked a slim finger at Moose.

"Stage'll be here in twenty minutes," he whispered, "but yuh better not show yore face till it comes."

Shattuck nodded. "Let this dude carry in the sack. Then I figger to take him out of town a ways, mebbe to that clump of willers down by the creek there half a mile." He added, with a sharp glance at Garman, "I'll be comin' back alone."

CHAPTER IV

"Preach Yoreself a Sermon"

YOUNG Dave Bryson felt a cold chill sweep up his spine. His jaw squared. He had figured they would try to get rid of him, and now the time had come.

Danger isn't the worst thing that can happen to a man, though, he was thinking, as he staggered on inside the office with the heavy sack. He saw the scales on its castors near the counter and deposited his burden on the flat surface, the balance arm clanking in the silence. "Hey, don't need to weigh that java in," the clerk called.

He was a slight, bone-thin man with a pair of narrow, disinterested eyes. He glanced once at Dave Bryson's dirty, blood-smeared cheek and yawned, rubbed a stick-fingered white hand through his hair.

"We ain't no freight outfit," he said.

"That ain't freight," Bryson said quickly, his eyes on Chet Garman. He was staking everything on the next move. "Is it, Chet?"

The little outlaw's cold eyes slitted in his solid face, flicked to the office door and the walk outside. Moose had gone back to the rig.

"Just what do yuh mean, dude?" he asked. "That there sack holds our possibles, and it's goin' with us. Can't help what the printin' on the sack says. It ain't freight!"

The clerk was bending over the scales, peering at the figures on the balance arm.

"Mebbe it's rocks, then," he offered slowly. "Because she's shore heavy for coffee—or clothes. Looky there—reads over a hundred and fifty pounds. And the sack says a hundred pounds net, Arbuckle coffee."

Bryson backed away from the scales, put his flat shoulders against the office wall. The clerk had opened his clasp-knife, reached out and cut the string on the sack top. Sunderson's money sack poked out like a sore thumb.

Garman ripped out a curse. He made a dive for the clerk's arm, twisted it until the man yelped in pain.

"Drop that toad-sticker!" Chet snarled.

"Hey, what you tryin' to do?" the man wailed in sudden fear.

"Drop that knife!" Chet ordered. "Can't yuh hear nothin'? I said there was clothes and such in there. You take my word for it, savvy?" Garman's right hand closed over his six-gun.

Bryson lunged at the gunman, his fists thudding into the man's rawhide body. Chet staggered back, released the clerk under the drummer's rush. He jerked at his gun, but didn't get it out. For at that instant Bryson's fist connected with his flat lips, smashed him back against the scales. The coffee sack tipped over. Round coffee beans spilled over the floor.

Garman's boots slipped on the brown pellets and he fell flat.

"Quick, man!" Bryson snapped. "That's Chet Garman, the outlaw. The big nose outside is Moose Shattuck. You got a gun, grab it pronto!"

The clerk just stood there, white-faced, his slack mouth dropping. He was petrified.

"Chet Garman—Moose Shattuck!" Bryson repeated.

The names came from his mouth, over and over, like horses running. But the clerk's fear made him beyond thinking. He leaped toward the counter, dived behind it.

Garman's throwing knife sizzled past Bryson's ear, sliced into the woodwork. Dave ducked, felt the clerk's clasp-knife under his hand. His fingers closed on it and he leaped at the prone outlaw.

Chet's six swung up, crashed lead and flame. Then the drummer was on him, thrusting, stabbing with the little four-inch blade.

There was a muffled roar as the gunman's .45 exploded again, between the two thrashing men. Bryson gasped with pain as the lead cut into his shoulder. Then he was back at Garman, knife plunging into the squirming man's chest.

Dave Bryson rolled free. Garman choked and lay still, the pocket knife thrusting up from his breast. Bryson lurched to his feet. Blood pumped from his left arm.

Moose came on the run, bull voice roaring. It would be all over in a moment. The big ape had a six in his hand. He was on the walk, plunging through the door.

For an instant of time, Bryson felt like a trapped animal. There was no rear exit, nothing but that front door, now filled by the huge form of the long-nosed killer. Then Bryson's eyes fell on the scales. He shoved with all his strength, sent it rolling toward the door on its castors.

Like a "critter" on the end of a hungry line, Moose stumbled with his big feet, sailed

into the air, so great was his charge, and fell flat on his face over the base of the scales.

All in the same movement, Bryson scooped Chet Garman's .45 from the banty gunman's lifeless fingers. He spun around, blasted death at Moose Shattuck. Moose was flipping over, training his big .45 on the drummer.

It didn't take any special Colt savvy to cock a gun and pull the trigger. Nor was it easy to miss at that close range. But Dave Bryson's face was pale alabaster and his heart beat a tattoo in his chest.

The shooting part was not too difficult. It was the facing of almost certain death, facing Moose Shattuck's deadly gun magic. The big outlaw wouldn't miss at that range.

Sharp pain stabbed at Bryson even as he saw his own lead stitch puffs of dust into Shattuck's barrel chest.

Bryson felt a leg give beneath him. He sprawled forward on his elbows. There was no feeling in the leg. The slug that tore across his ribs cut his breathing as though it were a sharp knife. He steadied his gun, elbow resting on the floor, stared into Shattuck's eyes. There was something in those depths he hadn't seen before. Fear!

But it was not a fear that had the force to lower that long-barreled .45 pointing at Bryson's head. The drummer squeezed his trigger again. The smoke-filled little office shook and quivered with the blast of twin thunder claps of exploding gunpowder. He felt sudden, sharp hurt. Great lights burst before his eyes. The top of his head seemed to lift away from him. . . .

The pain was a hot blanket about Dave Bryson. He tore at it, couldn't rid himself of it. Sometimes his mind cleared, then he didn't want to awaken. Not to a life without the bright-haired Kathy.

His thoughts dwelt feverishly on Kathy. He kept seeing her white, strained face there in the store when she thought he was drunk. She ought to have known he wasn't. She knew he didn't drink.

Then he saw her that night of the dance. The cool freshness of Kathy, with the flame of her hair to warm his eyes. He couldn't give up. She was back there where Moose had shot her. He had to go back along that road, had to find her, to know for sure. He had to live that long.

Bryson opened his eyes. Kathy Wallace was smiling down at him, letting the tears flow down over her freckles.

There was talk around him. It filled the office. The gray-haired man with the rolled-up sleeves was packing things into a little black grip. He was doing some of the talking.

Bryson was in the stage office, flat on his back on the long counter. Bandages covered him. Then he saw old Lard James, marshal of Greenfield. The lawman was telling Clem Wallace something, his two chins quivering, his bright blue eyes snapping.

"And that just goes to show," James was saying, "that yuh can't go judgin' a man by the clothes he wears, nor his smell. That young feller don't even drink. Nothin' but lemon and soda. Ain't I stood right alongside him in the bar and seen him drink that pop? No, Clem, reckon yuh oughta preach yoreself a sermon. Dave's got six thousand dollars reward money comin' for capturin' Shattuck an' Chet Garman."

Clem Wallace nodded.

"Let's you and me go get some of that lemon and soda," he said. Reckon I need a drink right now—and mebbe a duckin' in the hoss trough."

After they had gone, Kathy leaned over Dave and put her warm lips on his forehead. In her eyes gleamed a new brilliance. A glowing light that was all tenderness.

"Oh, Dave!" she whispered. "The things you said when you were unconscious."

He blinked. So he had said things before he came to. "That's nothing to what I'm going to say," he said, and grinned. "But can't you do better than that?"

Kathy bobbed her pretty head.

"When your cheek heals and I can take that bandage from your face," she smiled.

"But how—how did you get here, Kathy? And what's your father doing here? Did you get my message in that sack of coffee?"

"Message?"

"Sure. Scribbled on the order blank. Stuffed it in that pound sack I told little Bobby to give you. The last time I saw you, I thought you'd been killed."

"I guess maybe you're not the only tenderfoot on this range." Kathy smiled. "I—I fainted! When that gun went off almost in my face. I—I just keeled off my pony."

"But how did you know? I mean, what brought you here, if it wasn't my warning that Shattuck was hidden in my rig?"

KATHY'S laugh was like creek water in the spring. Bubbling.

"Bobby," she said. "The little tyke was

making an awful noise in the store after you left. There was a wanted poster of Moose Shattuck on the wall where the sheriff had tacked it. Bobby was snapping his play pistol at it, yelling horrible things at the man in the picture.

"When I asked him to stop, he said that was the same long-nosed man he had seen hiding in your wagon, and he was going to shoot him. Dad wouldn't believe me when I told him. So I just saddled my Blackie and went after you. Dad missed me, then got the story from Bobby and came after me. He found me there by the side of the road. But, Dave, all that's over now. And I'm so proud of you. You were so brave!"

"Brave?" Dave said, rising on an elbow. "*Scared* is the word for it. As they say out here on the range—plumb scared. Almost as scared as I am right now. Because through that door I can see your dad coming, and I got something to ask him—about marryin' his daughter, and what to do with that six thousand reward money. Yes, and I owe your little brother a vote of thanks, but—no more candy!"

Benton's bullet knocked Red Payette backwards

GUNMAN'S GOAL

By LESLIE ERNENWEIN

Fate stacks the deck against Clay Benton when he tries to put aside his deadly guns in an effort to win happiness!

CLAY BENTON came to the weather-warped stage station at noon, observing how small and desolate it was against the vast sweep of brush-blotched desert and the timbered mountains that rose beyond it. This shabby, forlorn place reminded him how threadbare his clothing was and how few dollars remained in his pocket. He had turned down a riding job three hours ago. "I'll have to find something soon," he told himself.

Benton dismounted at the windmill watering-trough and stood there while his tired horse drank. He was tall and lean, and he looked a bit older than his twenty-seven years.

The station hostler came out, walking with an old man's reluctance.

"Dished up a plate of frijoles for you," he said sourly. "They're gittin' cold."

"*Gracias,*" Benton said.

He ate the frugal meal in appreciative silence.

"Anyone hiring cowhands hereabouts?" Benton asked.

The old man glanced speculatively at Benton's gunless hip, observing the faint pattern a holster had once made against the faded California pants.

"Yeah," he said, "if you've got a gun stowed away in your war bag. 'Breed' Riley is fixin' to take a slice of the Dragoon Mountain range away from the high country outfits. He's hirin' every drifter comes along. Payin' gun wages."

"So that's why he offered me a job this morning," Benton mused. He shaped up a cigarette and lit it. "I've had my fill of fighting. Three years of it. Too much."

Climbing into the saddle, Benton asked—"How far to the next town?"

"Twenty miles, the last ten straight up," the hostler said. "It's called Junction."

Benton rode on, tilting his hat brim against the sun's brassy glare and smoking his cigarette down until it burned his fingers. It was ironical, he reflected, that a man who'd earned high wages for three years should be forced to economize on tobacco, food and clothing.

There was irony, too, in the fact that the only work he could find would be gunsmoke work. It was enough to make a man discard every dream he'd ever had of having his own home and all that went with it.

For a time, as he rode mile after dusty mile through the desert's scorching heat, Clay Benton's dismal thoughts were like bickering companions nagging at his mind and clawing at the thin fabric of his resolutions.

What good was it for a man to strive against the strong tide of circumstances? He had done that for three years and had made a dream come true. But that was no sign he could do it again. Perhaps one dream fulfilled was all he was entitled to. Maybe he was a witless fool to try for another.

BENTON shrugged. Taking a wrinkled letter from his pocket, he read it in the leisurely fashion of a man savoring a familiar and precious thing. The letter was from his sister Mary.

It said—

"Thanks to you and all the money you've sent so regularly for so long, I am completely cured. And here is more good news, Clay darling. I've met the most wonderful man in the world, and we are to be married soon."

A whimsical smile eased Benton's long lips. Little Mary was well again after tragic years of illness. His dream for her had come true—gloriously, miraculously true.

Yet there'd been many a time when it had seemed hopeless, when only a stubborn, frantically nourished faith had kept his hope alive. Thinking of that now, Benton grinned. Perhaps he could do it again—for himself.

So thinking, he straightened in the saddle. Later, when he'd climbed high into the mountains and come finally to Junction, he had banished the bickering companions of doubt and loneliness. There'd be some sort of job in this town for him, some honest toil a man could do, and he could still retain his hope for a homestead in the hills.

After that, sooner or later, he'd meet the girl who was meant for him. The girl whose image he had seen in many a campfire on lonely nights.

Benton dismounted at Lambert's Livery. When his horse had been stabled, he stood in the barn's doorway, his glance traveling casually along Junction's wide, main thoroughfare. This town, he reflected, looked no different than a score of others he'd ridden through.

It had the same unlovely scatteration of 'dobe and false-fronted frame buildings, the same pungent odors of a blacksmith's forge, cattle pens and wood smoke.

Recalling that Trail Town had often held this same air of peaceful tranquility between recurring storms of violence, Benton wondered how much wild carousing and disorder broke out here on Saturday nights. There was a jail just east of the Odd Fellows Hall, but he observed no badge-toter on Main Street.

The eastbound stage rolled away from the Wells Fargo office, sun-sparkled dust cascading like water from its turning wheels. A man rushed out of the Palace Hotel and shouted at the rig.

"Hey, Pegleg—Pegleg Pierce!"

The driver pulled up, waiting for the man to climb aboard. Afterward, as the stage passed Slade's Cafe, Pegleg Pierce waved to a blond-haired girl who stood in the restaurant doorway, smiling up at him.

It was a strange thing. A startling thing. Until this moment Junction had seemed no different than any other town to Clay Benton. But now, gazing at that girl and seeing the late sunlight put a sorrel sheen on her hair and tint her oval face with peach-bloom loveliness, he was aware of an abrupt change.

So urgent was his sense of this that he smiled without knowing he smiled. He stood staring at the girl until the liveryman beside him asked wonderingly—

"You seen her somewhere before?"

Benton shook his head. "What's her name?"

"Linda Blake," the liveryman, Jake Lambert, said. "She's got no time for drifters, even if she is a waitress."

"So?" Benton mused, watching until Linda Blake went into the cafe. "The exact image of all a woman should be."

"What's that?" Lambert asked. "What kind of image you say?"

"A campfire image," Benton said.

Shouldering his war bag, he walked to the Palace Hotel in the absent-minded way of a man not quite awake.

He entered the hotel, crossing the lobby to where the owner, John Stuart, stood beside the desk with his ten-year-old son, Jeff. It was odd that Benton didn't notice the freckle-faced boy at all, for he liked youngsters, and they invariably liked him. But now his mind was filled with the remembered loveliness of Linda Blake and with the anticipation of securing peaceful employment in this town.

He put down his duffel and signed the ink-stained register with a pen that scratched badly.

"You must've borrowed this writing tool from the post office or Wells Fargo," he said to Stuart.

The bald-headed proprietor shrugged.

"Pens are like livery horses," Stuart said. "They're spoiled by heavy-handed galoots in a hurry." Then he glanced at the register and asked abruptly—"Are you the real Clay Benton? The man who tamed Trail City?"

Benton nodded.

Young Jeff let out a whoop.

"Gee—Clay Benton!"

The plain note of hero worship in the boy's voice brought a self-mocking smile to Benton's lips.

"I'm not bragging about it, son," Benton said.

Jeff's wide-eyed glance shifted to Benton's barren hip.

"I'd sure like to see the gun you killed all them wild ones with."

"Well," Benton said, "I'll make a deal. You tote a pitcher of hot water up to my room, and I'll show you my gun."

Jeff's broad smile revealed a missing tooth and twin dimples in his cheeks.

"It's a deal," he declared, hurrying off toward the kitchen. "I'll be up there in a jiffy."

"You just staying the night?" John Stuart asked.

Benton picked up his war bag. "I hope to stay longer."

HE NOTICED a well-oiled Winchester on the Texas longhorn rack above the desk. Then he went up the stairway, strongly conscious of Stuart's inquisitive eyes. The hotel proprietor, he guessed, wasn't pleased at his presence here. John Stuart had the look of a strict and respectable man. He'd be remembering all the exaggerated rumors and reports which had come out of Trail City.

Benton was untying his war bag when young Jeff came in with a pitcher of steaming hot water.

"Here she is!" Jeff placed the pitcher on a washstand.

"And here," Benton said, taking his gun from its oiled wrappings, "is my six-shooter."

The boy's eyes popped. He touched the greased cylinder with a stubby forefinger.

"Is it a Peacemaker?" Jeff asked.

"No. It's a Walker model. Best Colt ever made."

Jeff glanced at the smooth hickory handle.

"Didn't you cut any notches for all them outlaws you killed?" he asked.

Benton shook his head. "What's your name, son?"

"Jeff Brett Stuart. I'm named after my two uncles, Jeff and Brett. They were both in the Sixth Texas Cavalry with Sul Ross, and they both got killed. Uncle Brett was a great one with guns. He could shoot better on horseback than Dad can afoot. The only gun Dad owns is that Winchester on the lobby rack. He uses it for deer hunting. He never owned a pistol. Says a feller shouldn't tote one unless he intends to use it."

"Your father is right," Benton said and wrapped up his gun. "That's why I don't wear mine any more."

That didn't make sense to Jeff. He eyed

Benton wonderingly.

"But supposin' some tough hombre should tromp on your toes? You'd need it then, wouldn't you?"

Benton shrugged. "I'll take care of that when the time comes." Then he added in friendly fashion—"I'm going to shave and wash up, Jeff. I'll see you downstairs after a bit."

It was a full hour before supper when Clay Benton climbed onto a stool in Slade's Cafe and had his first close look at Linda Blake.

She stood straight and medium tall behind the counter, her oval face showing him the calm pleasantness of a self-reliant girl thoroughly at ease in meeting strangers in this public place.

Her honey-hued hair was drawn back with artless simplicity to a neat bunch at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were the warmest blue he had ever seen, and they met his glance without wavering. Yet there was no hint of boldness in them.

"Our regular supper isn't ready," she said quietly. "Would you like a steak and fried potatoes?"

Benton nodded. Watching her walk back to the kitchen he saw how gracefully she moved. She was, he thought, as perfectly proportioned as a girl could be. The soft, smooth contours of her face were duplicated in the womanly curves of her supple body. Even the tone of her voice, casual and impersonal as it had been, held a richness.

As Benton watched her bring his meal from the kitchen, he realized she was all a man would ever want in a woman.

Recalling what the liveryman had said about drifters and guessing that numerous saddle tramps had attempted to force their romantic notions on her, Benton offered no more than common courtesy as he ate his meal and paid for it.

There'd be plenty of time to let her know what his intentions were. He would do it in a proper and fitting way. It didn't occur to him that she might not be free to accept his attentions. He hadn't even thought to look at her left hand to see if she wore a wedding ring.

All he knew was that part of his dream had come true. Now he had to get a job and make the rest of it materialize. So he thought!

But there was to come a time—and soon—when Clay Benton would know it wasn't as simple as that.

Now, going into the Acme Bar, he was filled with a sense of well-being and sturdy confidence for the first time since leaving Trail City two months ago.

The saloon, like the restaurant, was practically deserted. The waiter, "Suds" Smith, stood behind the rosewood bar. One customer sat at a poker table, idly playing solitaire and occasionally pouring himself a drink. A swamper was sweeping the floor.

"What'll it be, Mister Benton," Smith inquired with the exact degree of respect which most bartenders show celebrated badge-toters.

"A cigar," Benton said, smiling a little at the thought of how quickly word of his presence had crossed Main Street. "Do you know of anyone who could use an ambitious man at a job of work?"

"Well now," Smith mused, thinking about this and plainly surprised, "I guess there's two or three outfits would be glad to hire you." He glanced at the poker table. "There," he said, lowering his voice to a confidential murmur, "is one of the reasons. 'Red' Payette. Him and the rest of Breed Riley's bunch are causing plenty trouble back in the hills."

Benton explained that he wanted a town job, not saying why.

"Anything at all, just so it pays a day's wages."

"I don't know of anything offhand," Smith said, "but I'll do a little inquirin' when my customers come in this evenin'."

At this instant, the snaggle-toothed old swamper swept around the poker table and Red Payette snarled viciously:

"Keep your filthy, stinkin' broom off my new boots!"

"I scarcely touched 'em," the swamper whined.

He was dodging back when Payette hit him hard in the face.

"Don't call me a liar, you old billy goat!" the redhead raged.

He was aiming a kick at the groveling oldster when Clay Benton grabbed him from behind.

EVEN as he snatched Payette's gun from holster and yanked him around, Benton realized that he was acting on pure impulse. This, he thought, fleetingly, was the first foolish move he'd made since turning in his badge at Trail City.

It was none of his affair and he had no legal reason to interfere. Worse than that, it was a wide open break in his peaceful resolutions. It threatened the very core of his crusade for a decent, gunless future.

All this occurred to Benton in the hushed moment that Payette's startled eyes peered up at him.

"Who are you?" the redhead demanded.

Benton stuck the man's gun inside his belt.

"I'm the gent who took your thunder pole," he said quietly, feeling the familiar strain of this and, from long habit, showing no sign of it. "Next time you hit an old man, be sure there's no one around that might pistol-whip you."

"So you're tough," Payette scoffed brazenly. He strode to the batwing door and stopped to speak. "I'm going to buy a gun at the mercantile. I'll come back and shoot you to ribbons."

Benton walked over to him, some of his peaceful resolutions melting at this man's cocksure tone.

"Don't bother to buy a new gun," Benton said, giving Payette a stiff-armed shove that sent him outside to the plank walk. "I'll leave yours at the hotel desk."

Seething resentment flamed bright in Payette's eyes.

"You best be wearin' one yourself next time you show on Main Street," he warned. "And I'll be waitin' until you do."

"Don't wait too long," Benton said drily. "You might catch cold."

Benton then crossed the street to the hotel. He thought irritably—I'm a fool if there ever was one. He handed the gun to John Stuart at the desk.

"Payette will be over after it," Benton said and went on upstairs.

Going to the front window of his room, he saw young Jeff come from the mercantile. The boy was chewing on a long stick of licorice candy, and that reminded him of his own boyhood. He had liked licorice and still did. His cowman father had chewed tobacco.

Young Clay Benton had made believe the black candy was "chawin' tobacker," and he had aped his father's habit of lumping it in his cheek. Everything had been fine in those days, before his mother and father were killed in a runaway. Afterwards, when he and Mary had had to shift for themselves, it had been plenty tough.

As Jeff turned in at the hotel, Benton saw Red Payette come across the street from the saloon. Red, Benton reckoned, had taken time for another drink or two. His blocky face was flushed and rutted by a scowl.

Watching him walk up to the veranda steps, Benton wondered how fast he was with a gun. Would the man wait for a shootout, as he'd bragged?

Benton was worrying about it when he went out into the hallway and stood at the top of the stairway well. He heard Payette's heavy steps cross the lobby floor.

"Suds Smith tells me it was Clay Benton took my gun away," Payette's voice said. "Is that right?"

"Yes," Stuart responded.

Then Jeff spoke—"I guess Clay Benton is the bravest man that ever stepped foot in Junction. He's the fastest shooter that ever lived."

Payette muttered something that Benton didn't catch. Then there was the thud of his new boots across the lobby floor, going out.

Benton went to his room. He stood again at the window, wondering if Payette would wait for him and hoping he wouldn't.

Benton saw the redhead tromp back across the wheel-churned dust. He stopped at the hitchrack in front of the saloon, glanced at his slack-hipped horse, and then looked at Suds Smith who was coming along the sidewalk with Sol Mandel, who owned the mercantile and was Junction's mayor. The two men stopped in front of Slade's Cafe, talking with the fat restaurant proprietor, who stood on the stoop.

Seeing all this, and guessing what it meant, Clay Benton smiled thinly. Junction, he thought, was waiting for a show. The stage was set and the audience was wondering when the act would go on. This was as familiar to him as an old joke told at roundups, and as humorless.

Red Payette leaned against the hitchrack, absently shaping a cigarette. He kept glancing at the hotel veranda. He lit his cigarette, nudged his gun up in its half-breed holster, and expelled a long drag of tobacco smoke through his nostrils.

He looked now, Benton thought, like a man who would wait all day. And all night, if it took that long.

Benton saw himself betrayed by his own rash impulse to protect a defenseless old man, a saloon swamper he'd never so much as spoken to, and whose name he didn't know. After all these weeks of keeping his gun wrapped up in his bedroll, of strictly

controlling his temper and turning down anything that looked like gunwork, he had built the makings of a gunfight in one moment's time.

Benton scowled darkly. But suddenly he saw Payette toss his cigarette to the dust and climb into his saddle. The redhead was leaving town!

FOR the first time in his life Clay Benton was thankful for the notoriety his badge-toting fights in Trail City had brought him. Red Payette, he guessed, had been thinking about those published stories of a town tamer. His imagination had got the better of him.

Benton grinned. He lit up the cigar he'd bought at the saloon.

He was watching a smoke ring drift tenuously toward the ceiling when Sol Mandel appeared in the doorway of his room.

"I've come to offer you a job as our town marshal," the mayor announced. "We've been without one since Ed Slack got killed a month ago. Ed was just a medium hand with a gun, and the wild ones knew it. With you, Mister Benton, it would be different. They'd shy clear of you, like Payette did just now. Suds Smith says you want a town job. Well, we've talked it over, and we want you to wear our marshal badge."

Benton frowned, not liking this at all.

"I appreciate the offer but I'd rather do something else. Anything else. I've had my fill of fighting. There would be work here for a man who isn't too particular, just so he doesn't have to use a gun. Guess I'll look around a bit."

"We'll pay more than any other job you'd get," Mandel said, plainly disappointed. "Will you take on the badge in case you don't find anything else?"

Benton thought about this for a long moment, remembering how low his funds were, and how urgently he wanted to remain in Junction.

"A man has to eat," he finally said.

He wondered why Mandel looked so pleased when the man went out.

By noon the next day, Benton had asked for work in every place of business in town. Then he knew the reason for Mandel's satisfied smile.

Benton had received polite—almost cheerful—refusals at each place he tried. The mayor, he figured, had paved the way for all those polite rejections.

Benton was examining his thin sheaf of dollar bills, wondering how long he could make them last, when he saw Linda Blake standing in the restaurant doorway, talking to Mrs. Stuart. The sight of her strongly stirred him. Noon's overhead sun made a golden halo of her hair and emphasized the lovely contours of her face against which her long lashes made their delicate patterns of shadow.

There was a moment then when Clay Benton weighed his dislike for a law badge, comparing it with his need to be near Linda Blake. Deliberately, stubbornly, he recalled every disagreeable task the marshal job entailed.

There'd be hilarious cowboys to subdue on Saturday nights, inebriates to tote to jail, drifters and toughs and tinhorn gamblers to watch. Sooner or later there would be a wild one willing to risk his hide for a chance to make a big brag. Like that young buck in Trail City, feeling bigger than Billy-be-damn one moment and then never feeling anything again.

That was the part Clay Benton dreaded—the utter, unchangeable finality of it.

Despite these dismal memories, he walked to Mandel's Mercantile.

"I'll take the job," he said to the mayor.

"Fine—fine!" Mandel exclaimed. "I'm glad you changed your mind."

"I didn't," Benton said flatly. "A man has to eat."

During the next three days, Clay Benton walked the streets of Junction with his fingers crossed, hoping for the best and expecting the worst.

His official hours of duty were from two o'clock in the afternoon until two o'clock in the morning, but it was generally understood that in case of emergency he could be called at any time.

On the second day, the Bootjack Ranch trail crew corraled a beef herd at the cattle pens just before dark and proceeded to celebrate the night at the Acme Bar. They got noisy but they accepted Benton's warning against firing their guns in town, and there was no real disturbance of Main Street's peace.

Three times each day Benton sat on a stool at Slade's Cafe, hugely enjoying the privilege of seeing Linda Blake at these regular intervals. On the fourth day she gave him a comradely smile when he came in. She called him "Marshal Clay."

That evening, while he purposely lingered over his supper until the other customers had departed, he asked her opinion of homestead land in the Owlhoot Hills north of Junction.

She seemed genuinely surprised that he should be considering such a future.

"I thought famous lawmen always kept wearing the badge until they died," she said.

"Not me, ma'am. I'm going to have a homestead. I've already talked with the land agents about it."

"That's what I wanted Jack to do," she said. "But he wouldn't listen to me." Sadness brought a brief change to her eyes, and she added, "Perhaps he will be different when he comes back."

The thought came to Benton that this Jack she mentioned might be her husband. That possibility was like a blow in the face.

"Is—is Jack your brother?" he asked haltingly, in the way of a man dreading the answer.

"Yes," Linda said, and her eyes were shining. "He'll be back any day. I can scarcely wait, now the time is so near."

Clay Benton grinned.

"I'm sure glad to hear it." He offered to escort her home. "Part of my job," he explained soberly.

"How nice," she said, taking his arm.

"Only nice thing about the job," he agreed.

SHE lived alone in a little house on Residential Avenue. The street was dark. He could not see her face when she said good night at the front gate, but he knew she was smiling. He could tell it by the soft, sweet tone of her voice.

When he got back to the hotel, young Jeff Stuart was sitting on the veranda steps.

"So you've got a girl," the boy said censuringly.

Benton sat down beside him.

"I hope so," he admitted. "I sure hope so."

"Gosh," Jeff muttered, putting a full cargo of boyish disgust into that single word. "Do you know about her brother?"

Benton shook his head.

"Jack Blake," Jeff announced, "is in Yuma Prison. Him and two other galoots got caught altering the brand of a Bootjack calf."

"So," Benton said, understanding why sadness had showed in Linda's eyes.

"I guess you wouldn't want to honeyfuss around a girl who's got a brother like that, would you?" Jeff asked.

"Well now," Benton reasoned, "you can't blame Miss Linda for what her brother did. That wouldn't be fair, Jeff."

"Mebbe not," the boy admitted grudgingly. "But it don't seem fittin' for a famous town-tamer to be sashayin' around with girls."

Benton patted Jeff's shoulder in comradely fashion.

"Don't you worry about it, son."

On his first Sunday in Junction the new marshal attended church, which was an unusual thing in itself. That and the fact he accompanied Linda Blake stirred up considerable talk. But Benton wasn't aware of it. He was as happy as a man could be.

That afternoon, when Linda shared the seat of a livery rig which Benton drove up the Owlhoot Hills road, she seemed to share his happiness also.

It was ironical that Jack Blake should arrive in Junction the very next day, and that Benton should be sitting on the veranda with young Jeff at the time.

That's him!" Jeff exclaimed. That's Jack Blake gittin' out of the stage!"

Benton saw a tall, blond-haired man step down to the sidewalk. Benton thought—He looks like Linda, except for his eyes. Jack's eyes weren't the deep, warm blue of his sister's. They were a sleety grey, and as he gave Main Street a questing consideration, they looked cold and brittle as broken glass.

"I'll bet two bits he goes to Slade's Cafe first thing and borrows money from Miss Linda," Jeff said. "Dad says that's what he always did when he lost in a poker game."

Benton got up, wanting to hear no more gossip about Linda's brother. He went to the jail and sat for a time on the stoop, thinking about Jack Blake and wondering how the man's return would affect the fine plans Benton and Linda had made yesterday.

Recalling the wild, sweet flavor of her lips when he had kissed her good-night, and how she'd said, "I can't give you an answer until Jack comes home," Benton felt an odd mixture of joyful anticipation and nagging worry.

When the marshal went to the cafe for supper at the usual early hour, Jack Blake was sitting at the deserted counter, conversing with Linda. She smilingly introduced him to Benton.

"Clay is planning to build a homestead up

in the hills soon," she added.

Benton offered his hand. Blake ignored it.

"I don't cotton to law dogs none at all," he said and strode out of the cafe.

Benton shrugged, seeing the frightened, fearful expression in Linda's eyes.

"He hasn't changed," Linda said sadly. "He's worse than when he went away."

She was misty-eyed as she went to the kitchen for Benton's supper.

This was at four o'clock. One hour later Red Payette and Tate Goll rode into town. The two Riley riders shook hands with Jack Blake on the Acme veranda, then pushed through the batwing doors in the fashion of men bent on celebration.

Watching this reunion from the Palace steps, Clay Benton felt a chilling apprehension. Jack Blake was tougher than Payette. If trouble came, Blake might not run away from it, as Payette had.

The import of that was like a weight on Benton's shoulders. It tightened all his muscles and made him curse the trick of fate that had caused him to accept a marshal's job here.

He was grimly reviewing the peculiar circumstances that had brought him to this dismal moment when a gun's racketing explosion came from the saloon. The sound was instantly followed by the tinkle of shattered glass.

YOUNG Jeff Stuart rushed out of the hotel lobby, his boyish, high-pitched voice demanding excitedly to know what had happened. Over at the mercantile, Sol Mandel came to the doorway. All along the street people peered at the saloon and at Marshal Clay Benton, who walked across the wide dust without hurry and without hesitation.

Although he didn't glance toward the cafe, Benton knew that Linda would be watching also.

When Benton stepped through the barroom doors, he saw at once how it was to be, and he knew beyond shadow of doubt that the shot which had shattered the bar mirror had been a deliberate way of getting him in here.

For the three riders were waiting, all facing him and brazenly grinning.

Stopping just inside the doors, Benton stared at them.

"Who fired that gun?" he asked.

"Me," Jack Blake said instantly. "What you figurin' to do about it, badge-toter?"

With the thought of Linda uppermost in his mind, Benton replied in a controlled and casual voice.

"I'm going to give you ten minutes to pay Smith for the damage and ride out of town."

"Supposin' I don't?" Blake asked.

"Then I'll arrest you on a charge of malicious mischief," Benton said flatly and turned back to the batwings.

"I got a mind to shoot your hat off, law dog, just to watch you pick it up," Blake taunted.

Benton knew then that Blake was intoxicated. And Benton also knew what he should do. But because waiting had worked successfully with Red Payette, he shrugged and went on across the street.

Arresting Linda's brother would be a sorry chore at best. If Blake forced a shoot-out, it would be a calamity. Linda would never marry the man who had killed her brother. That's what a showdown would mean.

John Stuart was standing on the Palace veranda with young Jeff.

"Blake starting trouble already?" Stuart asked, and when Benton nodded, the hotel proprietor said grimly, "Jack was never any good, and he never will be. You might as well understand that right now, Marshal."

At this exact instant, a bullet whanged past Clay Benton. He heard a sickening sound of impact and saw little Jeff jerk spasmodically. Benton was remotely aware of the blast behind him. But his entire interest was concerned with catching Jeff and rushing into the hotel with him. He heard Mrs. Stuart's piercing scream as she saw the red on her boy's shirt.

Benton gently lowered Jeff to a leather couch in the lobby. The boy's mother kneeled sobbingly beside him. There was a throat-clutching interval when Jeff's pale, freckled face seemed lifeless. The boy didn't seem to be breathing at all.

Then John Stuart came rushing in with Doc Endicott.

"Don't let my boy die, Doc—don't let him die!" Stuart cried.

Benton turned away, knowing with terrible certainty that he was responsible—that his dread of killing Jack Blake had resulted in this. He hadn't expected Blake to shoot at him while his back was turned. Missing him, Blake had hit little Jeff.

Benton shivered, remembering with awful clarity how the bullet's impact had sounded.

Remorse and regret slugged through him as he crossed the veranda.

Then, as the marshal saw Jack Blake brazenly waiting with Payette and Goll across the street, Benton did a strange thing. He smiled. But there was no mirth in it, no humor. It was the self-mocking smile of a man discarding his dreams.

Here, Benton knew, was the deal he'd dreaded. This was the inevitable climax to every marshal's career—the dismal, dreary moment when he had to kill or be killed. Here was the gunman's goal.

"I didn't mean to hit the kid," Blake called in a thickly-tongued voice. "I was just funnin' with a yeller-bellied law dog."

There was no sign of regret in Blake's tone, nor in his cold, bold eyes. It didn't seem possible that so callous a brute could be Linda's brother.

And now Benton glimpsed Linda standing in the restaurant doorway with her hands clasped tightly across her bosom. Her eyes seemed strangely dark against the pallor of her face.

Benton thought—She'll see me shoot her brother, and she'll never forget it!

Clay Benton made one final, futile effort to avoid the thing he dreaded. Walking toward Blake, he spoke flatly.

"You're under arrest. I'm going to take your gun before it does any more damage."

Red Payette took three quick steps to the left, so that he was farther away from Blake. Blake's right hand hovered close to his holster.

"Stop right where you are, law dog!" he cried.

Benton ignored the command.

Goll stepped aside, and Benton guessed instantly that Goll or Payette would make the first draw, atempting a sneak shot while Benton's attention was centered on Blake.

Then, as Mayor Mandel shouted, "Watch Payette!" Benton saw the redhead's splayed fingers dart down.

The rest of it was automatic with Clay Benton. He drew with an effortless motion so smooth that it seemed almost slow, yet his gun was blasting before Payette had completed his sneak draw. Benton saw the shock of his slug knock Red Payette backward. The marshal heard a loud blast somewhere behind him and was wondering about that as he turned and, strangely, saw Blake go down in the grotesquely disjointed way a dead man falls.

Benton heard Goll call out—"I'm out of it—don't shoot!"

BENTON observed then that Goll wasn't addressing him. The Riley rider was staring across the street.

Utterly astonished and bewildered, Benton turned and saw John Stuart standing on the hotel veranda with a smoking Winchester in his hands. Then Clay Benton understood why Goll had quit and why Jack Blake was lying dead in Main Street's dust.

John Stuart, who believed that a gun should not be toted unless intended for use, had used the Winchester on Blake to avenge little Jeff.

Almost at once the street was crowded with people. A man slapped Benton on the shoulder.

"That was slick shooting, Marshal," he said. "You cut Red down!"

Benton scarcely heard the praise. He called anxiously to Stuart.

"How is Jeff?"

"Doc says he's going to live," John Stuart said.

"Thank goodness!" Benton exclaimed.

Then he pushed through the crowd to where Linda stood.

"You can cry on my shoulder if you like," he told her.

She came into the comforting circle of his arms. But she didn't cry.

"I'm so thankful you didn't have to do it, Clay," she said. "It would have been a barrier between us. I've been alone so long."

"You'll never be alone again."

She was the goal of all his glorious dreams, and he held her gently, in the fashion of a man protecting a fragile and priceless possession.

Coming Soon: LOST EMPIRE, a Complete Action Novel Featuring Walt Slade, fighting Texas Ranger, by BRADFORD SCOTT!

Carefully, he fired the strange weapon at the gunman

GUN SHY

By SAMUEL MINES

Young Sheriff Carter was having a grim tussle with his conscience, but people were saying he'd lost his nerve!

SHERIFF ABNER CARTER came out of the courthouse and found a little crowd gathered about the foot of the steps. Seeing them there so unexpectedly, he hesitated a moment, as though he had not been prepared for this, and was momentarily at a loss.

"Go on, Ab." His deputy, "Grassroots" Polk had come up behind and nudged him.

Sheriff Carter delayed for a glance behind him. He was a young, vigorous man, with a square, long chin and deep-set, intelligent eyes. He towered almost a foot over the scrawny little deputy. Grassroots Polk was an ex-cowpuncher, wiry, bowlegged, seamed and wizened and scorched by life, and almost as tough as he looked.

While Carter still hesitated, a man stepped from the crowd and approached them. The sheriff recognized Henry Bromfield, the

town's leading merchant. He was smiling, and his hand was outstretched.

"Congratulations, Sheriff," he boomed. "We heard the judge cleared you." He pumped Carter's hand energetically. "Every man in town was solidly behind you—and women too, I reckon." He turned to the attentive group behind him. "Isn't that so, boys?"

"I'm much obliged," Sheriff Carter said awkwardly.

"Nonsense. You were doing your duty. I'm only sorry the case against Cassidy fell through. He's a—oh, oh, speak of the devil!"

"Bottles" Cassidy strode arrogantly through the door. A bull of a man with buttonlike features and sharp, shrewd eyes, he had the arrogant strength of a man who respects only himself. He halted on widespread legs and let his insolent gaze pour over the scattered group.

"The welcomin' committee!" he sneered. "Clasping yore dear sheriff to yore bosoms and congratulating him—for murder!"

Carter flinched, but said nothing, his face going a little gray under the tan.

"Shut yore trap, Cassidy," Grassroots Polk warned.

But Cassidy spared him not even a contemptuous glance.

"I said murder!" he roared. "Gunnin' down an innocent kid and then tryin' to pin a holdup on me an' a dead button because he didn't have brains enough to read sign on the real owlhooters! Shore, congratulate him!" He whirled on Carter and his little eyes stabbed hatred at point-blank range. "I'll be in town," he jeered. "Any time yuh've got enough sand in yore craw, leave off yore tin badge and come down. We'll settle our little differences. Hear?"

HE SHOVED through the crowd, which fell away from him, and was gone. Bromfield cleared his throat.

"There's a bad man," he said regretfully. "I'm afraid we shall have to hang him some day."

Sheriff Carter did not hear him. Almost blindly, he pushed his way through the crowd in Cassidy's wake and started down the street. Grassroots Polk fell in beside him. They went down treeless Maple Street and turned in at the familiar board shack which served as sheriff's office. It had been the sheriff's office before the new brick courthouse had been built and Carter, out of sentiment, had insisted upon keeping it, though it was admittedly less convenient than the modern building.

He sank now, into his old leather chair with the nostaglia of a tired man and stared around him at the familiar walls covered with trophies and posters. His gunbelt, with holster and revolver hung on a nail, and he stared at it moodily.

Polk, who had flopped into a rickety Windsor chair and tilted it back by putting the soles of his boots against the sheriff's desk, intercepted the glance.

"Reckon it'll wear off, in time," he observed, awkward at showing his concern so openly.

"Wear off?" Carter considered it. "Mebbe. But it's not somethin' I wanted on my conscience."

"Look," the wizened little man said. "The only people who don't have things on their lily-white consciences are the people who never do a thing in their lives. Ary man is bound to make mistakes."

"Yes. Just a mistake on my part. But it cost a younker his life."

"From where I was I don't see how yuh could have avoided it, Ab," the deputy argued. "Everybody was runnin' and yellin' and there was a lot of shootin' and here come these spooked gents, luggin' the cash from the bank and the kid right in with them. And somebody did take a shot at you and the kid was totin' a shootin' iron."

"And four witnesses swore he was tryin' to stop the holdup," Carter sighed.

"It was tough luck. The kid's number was up and nobody coulda saved him. He was loco for runnin' right into that bunch."

"A nice fatalistic attitude," Carter remarked moodily. "I'm glad it gives yuh comfort, Grassroots."

"I've seen hosses that had too rough a dose of breakin' go saddle-shy," the deputy observed. "Don't you go gettin' gun shy, Ab. If yuh do, Cassidy will kill yuh sure's the Lord made little green apples."

"I'd like to resign," Carter said bitterly. "But I can't now. It would be running under fire. Everybody's waitin' to see what I'll do. And especially Cassidy. It's just—just that I don't want to take the chance of killin' an innocent man ever again!"

Polk shrugged.

"How yuh gonna tell beforehand?" he wanted to know.

They sat in silence for a long time, hearing the little noises of the town's life that went

on beyond the closed door. It was their town; they had lived in it a long time. They understood it and they loved it. They knew every person, child and dog, every hole in the road, every tin can. Each had its own special meaning. Ab Carter didn't want to go away. It was his town.

"I'll go on being sheriff," he muttered.

Sighing wearily, he rose, took down the gun-belt, and buckled it around his lean hips. As he pushed the tongue home, the door opened and Henry Bromfield came in.

"Going out?" he asked. "Just thought I'd tell you, Ab, that Bottles Cassidy is down at the Beer Keg telling it scarey about the horrid fate in store for you if you take off your badge and go to meet him. Now don't go off half cocked. I think Polk here ought to run him in for disturbing the peace."

"Now I take that right kindly of yuh," Polk beamed, getting up.

Carter shook his head.

"I'm going to go on being sheriff," he told them. "We'll make the rounds just like we do every night."

They went outside and split up. Bromfield went back to his store. Polk went off on Jackson street towards the Express office to await the coming of the stage. Sheriff Carter strolled down toward the railroad station.

The sun had tobogganed down the steep slope of the mountains to the west and plunged out of sight. Now the light was going out of the sky and blue shadows were thickening on the face of the earth. His mood matched the shadows as Carter moved slowly past the motley line of buildings, board, brick, adobe, each a symbol of his town's growth.

He came to the depot, exchanged a word with the agent, watched the train roar in and discharge its freight and passengers and puff importantly out again. Night was full on as he started back, going around through Water Street and mechanically trying the doors of early closing shops.

In half an hour he had worked his way back to Maple Street. This was the opposite end from the courthouse and here the lights of three saloons spread yellow rectangles from windows and doors in the dark road.

An upraised voice hit his ears, and there was no mistaking Bottles Cassidy's gargantuan bellow. With a little grimace and a deep intake of breath, he stepped up on the plank veranda and pushed through the door of the Beer Keg.

A blast of sound and light and smell struck him. Men were scattered all through the room, with the hot glare of Kerosene lamps beating down on them. There was a straggling line-up at the bar, with every ear and eye glued to Cassidy who was roaring and beating the bartop.

No one noticed Carter's quiet entrance. Cassidy held the floor.

"The tin badge represents the law!" he shouted. "So nobody can touch him. He can kill a harmless button an' be congratulated. But I'm thinkin' of Ab Carter—the man—not the law! And a tin badge don't scare me. Let him take it off an' we'll pick a crow and see who gets most feathers in his teeth! I wanta see Ab Carter—"

There was a little metallic clatter as Sheriff Carter laid his badge on the bar. The eyes that had clung to Cassidy swiveled around and fastened on it. Bottles Cassidy himself, jarred off-stride, let his jaw hang down as he stared at its bright unwinking shine. Only for a moment. His eyes, and the others' lifted to take in Carter's poised and waiting figure. Then, like an explosion, men scattered out of the line of fire.

Cassidy melted away from the bar, balancing himself on the balls of his feet. He crouched, his right hand hooked and trembling over the butt of his gun. A little smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Glad to see yuh, Sheriff," he sneered. "Plumb glad. Folks, yuh'll notice he's taken off the tin badge. I want you-all to remember that at the inquest!"

His hand dipped—fast. To the collective surprise of the audience, Carter did not try to match the draw. The sheriff stepped in like lightning. His left hand clamped Cassidy's wrist as the gun emerged from its holster. A reflex tightening of the big man's fingers squeezed the trigger. There was a blast and a gout of smoke. The bullet splintered wood to the left of Carter's foot. Then the sheriff's right fist sank to the wrist in Cassidy's solar plexus.

Carter released him and stepped back. Paralyzed, Cassidy hung there a moment as though something were holding him up. His eyes turned glassy. Then he started to fall. He was a long time reaching the floor. When he struck the saloon shook with the impact.

SHERIFF Carter bent down, took his gun and tucked it into his belt. Uncer-

emoniously, he gripped Cassidy's collar in his right hand, collected his badge with the left and started out, dragging the half-conscious man over the rough floor.

The door slapped inward to admit Grassroots Polk, gun in hand and out of breath. He stopped in his tracks.

"Heard a shot," he said, with a fine assumption of nonchalance. "Whose was it, his or yores?"

"His," Carter said briefly. "Toss him in the jail to cool off. Let him out in the morning."

Polk booted the gasping, retching man to his feet and herded him out. Carter glanced once at the still pop-eyed assemblage and followed them through the door. He left only a brief silence behind him.

"Pinch me," muttered a barfly. "I'm dreamin'."

"Like Grant took Vicksburg," said another. "Only without firin' a shot."

"Wonder why he didn't salivate Bottles?" puzzled a third.

It was with no perceptible lightening of his gloom that Ab Carter resumed his night rounds.

Following instruction, Grassroots Polk released Bottles Cassidy next morning before breakfast, so the county would not have the expense of feeding him. Cassidy was quiet, but not subdued. He accepted his gun, swung open the cylinder to see that it was loaded and snugged it down in his holster. Then he made his only remark:

"Tell Carter that next time I'll be shore an' keep him ten feet from me."

Polk relayed that message when Cheriff Carter came on duty at noon. The deputy told it straight, watching, but not prying. Carter smiled faintly, that was all, and began busying himself with some paper work that had accumulated.

Early in the afternoon the unmistakable noise of trouble penetrated the heat-laden air. The popping of shots, yells, the stamp of galloping hoofs. Polk shot out of the door like a determined badger, Carter followed. He nailed a townsman scurrying by, asked a question.

"Trail crew in with a herd for the shipping pens," the man panted. "Gettin' drunk as fast as they can an' shootin' up the town."

A block ahead, Polk waved cryptic signals, shot around the corner on the heels of a group of charging horses. Carter ran down the street, seeing the alarmed faces of the townspeople as they ducked behind shutters and hastily closed doors. Shots blasted the quivering air and punctuated the high-pitched yells of trail-weary cowboys letting off steam.

As he reached the spot where Polk had stood when waving, Carter became aware of a fresh outburst of sound. It came from the Lady Slipper, another of the town's saloons. He turned that way and went in.

There were half a dozen strange cowboys at the bar, dusty, bearded and almost as drunk as they thought they were. They had shot the necks off several bottles and smashed a mirror behind the bar.

"Hold it!" Carter yelled as he stomped in.

The noise stopped, and they turned and looked him over. He stalked toward them.

"All right, men," he snapped. "Yuh'll have to turn in yore guns while yuh're in town. Yuh'll get them back when yuh leave."

A broken-nosed little ranny with angry red eyes laughed with a sound like splitting wood.

"Lawdog," he snarled, "we've drove eight hundred miles to this jerkwater railroad an' used better towns than this for firewood. No tin badge gets our guns, savvy? That is, less'n he thinks he can come and take them!"

"Fair enough," Carter said, smiling a little.

He had continued to move forward, so smoothly that not until it was too late did the cowboy realize his error.

Carter was on him like a wolf. His big arms encircled the rider, gripped him in a crushing clasp and swung him around to present his back to the others who had immediately gone for their guns.

"Drop them," Carter ordered sharply.

The cowboy struggled and snarled and planted a bruising kick on Carter's instep. The sheriff let him go, hooked a savage right fist to his chin that sent him plunging back into the arms of his mates. On the outskirts, one of the cowboys whipped up his gun. Carter swept a glass from the bar, let fly.

The whisky splashed the close-packed bunch and the glass itself struck the gun-wielder squarely in the forehead. He yelled and went over in a wildly thrashing melee of arms and legs. Carter grabbed a bottle from the bar and waded in, swinging it. There were shouts and cries and the thump of his weapon as it dented dusty sombreros.

The bunch split up separating like quicksilver, and flowing together again. Another shot blasted and the bullet spanged through the ceiling.

On hands and knees, the little bent-nosed rider whom Carter had first hit, scrambled for his gun. He half-raised and drew a bead on the fighting sheriff's back.

A shot roared from the doorway. The cowboy dropped the gun and twisted half around, clutching at his bullet-torn arm. Grassroots Polk, two guns leveled, stamped into the barroom.

"Party's over," he announced. "Lift 'em, you curly wolves, afore I shoot yore shirt buttons out through the back of yore shirts."

Guns thumped the floor. A sullen crew raised their hands. Calmly Sheriff Carter collected the weapons.

"To the calaboose?" Polk inquired.

"Don't want them cluttering up our jail," Carter muttered. "Take them in and let Judge Ryan slap a fine on them. They can stay in town if they behave themselves. And get their guns on the way out."

HE WAS sitting in his chair at the office when Polk came back. The deputy cocked his feet up and announced:

"Two hundred and seventy-five dollars worth of fines. Pay our salaries, huh?" He stared blandly at the ceiling. "You know, Ab, some sharp-eyed folks noticed yore gun was in its leather all through that fracas. You mighta got shot if I hadn't come back."

Carter made no answer. The remark didn't seem to require any.

"Folks admit yuh're mighty brave," Polk went on. "Tacklin' a tough crew like that with a bottle as weapon. But they're also beginnin' to ask themselves if yuh're gun shy suddenly—uh—scared of shootin' it out."

Carter was unreasonably irritated.

"What difference does it make to them how I enforce law and order as long as I do it? Do they want me to kill people?"

"Nope. They don't want yuh to get killed. An' if yuh're gun shy, yuh're gonna get yorseself killed, soon's some salty hombre catches on."

"Let me work it out myself!" Carter said heatedly. He rose up and trod heavily out of the office.

Polk sighed and made a little gesture of hopelessness with his hands.

The word went through the town like a grass fire. Carter knew it by the quality of the looks he received. They were his friends, they were on his side. But they were puzzled and a little fearful for him. A sheriff who lost his nerve, who was afraid to swap lead when the pinch came was as good as dead. And that meant trouble for everyone.

He saw it when next he met Bottles Cassidy. The big man made no hostile move or sound. He merely regarded the sheriff with just such a look as a cat might have upon observing a bowl of goldfish. He smiled and passed on. It was the smile of a man who delays his triumph in order to savor the full joys of anticipation.

So Carter knew the wintry season of his testing had begun. The worst part of his ordeal was his own uncertainty. It was this which had robbed him of his nerve, the doubt that he was right even in this course of action.

The law which he still represented, demanded that he defend it to the best of his ability and resources. By his piddling compromise with his conscience he was exposing himself and his neighbors to trouble. For refusal to use his gun might yet result in a robbery or killing which he would be unable to check.

On the other hand he knew himself well enough to know that his mind was sick with the weight of its guilt and that he could not be well again until he had settled his problem with himself. To use his guns again before that was done was to aggravate his illness.

He should resign. He had no right to pretend being sheriff when he was less than half a sheriff. If Grassroots hadn't come into the Lady Slipper in time to save him, he'd be dead now. It was a poor basis for any kind of future as sheriff.

He grappled with the problem as he went his night rounds, trying doors, looking in at the Bon Ton Cafe to see that Mary Ellis was all right, checking the freight room of the railroad station.

The law had held him blameless in the accidental shooting of a bystander at the scene of a holdup. Could he accept the judgment of the law and wipe his own slate clean? His conscience was more finicky than that. He had taken an innocent life. He—he alone was responsible for the fact that a boy had done no one harm of any kind, was not walking today under the star-filled sky.

His mind groaned under the weight of that

responsibility. Yes, by all the laws of logic and legal jurisprudence, no reasonable blame could be attached to him. The boy's ill-omened luck had thrust him into a position where anyone would have mistaken him for a member of the outlaw gang. But it did not help. Over and over his mind whispered, "You killed an innocent boy." He was sick with the despair of his position.

Maple Street was still as death at midnight. His own duties were long over, but sleep had no attraction for him. He walked quietly, scuffing the warm dust with his boots, looking for an answer as men always have, in the bright indifferent stars. A bright half moon threw a silver track down the center of the road and etched in bold contrast the black shadows of buildings and alleys.

He passed the bank and went on, thinking to walk clear out into open country. But at Bromfield's store his steps lagged suddenly. His eyes had seen and passed over, but in his memory lingered the suddenly recalled sight of a flicker of light in the bank.

Softly he retraced his steps. It seemed dark. He mounted the wooden step carefully, peered in through the window. Yes, a dim glow wavered in there, such a glow as a shielded candle might make.

His hands reached out, touched the knob of the door. Slowly, he tried it. It was locked. They had not come this way.

Moving with the infinite patience of an Indian, his foot lifted from the step, and he let his weight down carefully. Once in the road he slid around through the alley to the back.

Momentarily he had forgotten his fears and his problem. He was a manhunter in his own element again. There was a fierce joy in this pitting of his skill and craft against the owlhoot. It was a personal contest and a challenging one, for he had to win each time—or there would be no next time.

The back door gaped wide. Sliding up and pinning himself flat against the wall beside it, he listened. There was a hushed whisper of voices inside the bank, the muted clink of metal. He glanced around. Two horses, ground-reined, stood nearby in readiness. He toyed with the idea of leading them off, but abandoned it. The men would hear their hoofs instantly with the door open so much.

"She's ready!" came a whisper from inside. "Stand back!"

There was a quick scrambling, then a breathless wail. Without seeing Carter could visualize their movements perfectly. They had set a small charge to blast the door of the old safe off its hinges. They were holed up now behind a protecting desk or corner. As soon as the blast came they would leap in, clean out the safe and run for it. Usually they would be gone long before the sleeping citizenry, aroused by the explosion, could gather its wits and arrive upon the scene.

The blast came, a dull explosion that rocked the bank and shook the ground under his feet. At once there was a scurrying inside. Carter tensed beside the doorway.

IN SECONDS, rapid footsteps beat on the floor, rushing for the outside. A big man burst through the doorway. Carter's fist was cocked; even as he let fly, he saw, without surprise, that the man was Bottles Cassidy.

It was logical, if he had time to think about it. Cassidy had simply seen a much better way of getting even than by merely killing the sheriff. If he cleaned out the bank and made an unopposed getaway, that was blow enough to the sheriff, who could not hope to follow without meeting gunplay. If the sheriff tried to stop him, then Cassidy might have the double joy of killing him and robbing the bank at the same time. It was, in its own twisted way, almost admirable, as a plan.

Sheriff Carter's fist glanced off the back of Cassidy's skull, just behind the ear. The big man staggered forward several steps, dropping the bags he was carrying with a metallic clink and nearly falling. He whirled and snatched for his gun.

Carter was already propelling himself forward like a human projectile. As he shot past the doorway a gun roared inside the bank, lighting the interior momentarily with a flash of flame. The bullet ripped through the air somewhere near him.

Cassidy's gun was half out when the sheriff's flying body struck him. They went down together with the force of that collision and rolled. Cassidy's gun bounced several feet away. With grim intent, he ignored the sheriff and scrambled for it, on hands and knees. Carter rolled over, caught his boot and yanked, pulling him flat. Then both men swung swiftly to their feet.

Out of the corner of his eye, Carter saw a dark figure appear in the back door of the bank, and a stab of fear pierced him as he realized the cross-fire he was caught in.

He charged Cassidy again, seeing the gun blast flame at him from the door. An edge of fire tore through his back, and he knew the bullet had gashed the heavy muscles overlaying his shoulder blades. But the shock of it didn't immediately hit him, he was too intent upon reaching Cassidy. The big man was swinging at him wildly.

He caught Cassidy's arm, twisted it behind him and whirled the outlaw around to face his gunman partner.

"Look out!" Cassidy bawled.

The other held his fire.

"Break loose!" the sidewinder snarled. "They'll be here a runnin'!"

Cassidy began to struggle violently, and as the sheriff twisted his arm up, Carter stepped on something hard. It was Cassidy's gun, on the ground. "Hurry up!" Cassidy's partner rapped. "They're coming!"

Voices and lights had begun to stab the dark. The sound of running feet came swiftly nearer.

"I ain't waitin'!" the gunman flung out, and he began gliding toward the horses.

"Blast you!" Cassidy screamed. "You can't leave me. I'll talk—"

The gun roared instantly. And Carter felt the heavy impact of the slug taking Cassidy full in the chest. The man went limp in his grasp at once. His weight was too much, delivered so unexpectedly, and as he slipped down, Carter let him go, fell with him, and reached out for the fallen gun.

Wildly, the retreating man fired again, and fumbled for the reins of his horse. Both animals were excited and frightened, but he managed to clutch the reins, and fling his sack of money across the saddle.

SHERIFF Carter's fingers closed on Cassidy's gun. He raised up slightly and pointed it.

It was a strange weapon, so it took him two shots instead of his normal one. The first went high, but the second toppled the killer as he was swinging himself up into the saddle.

Then, as Carter stood up, the pistol swinging by its trigger guard from his lax forefinger, half the town burst through the alley, with Grassroots Polk in the lead.

Lanterns played over the scene. Polk came to Carter, stalking as lightly as a cat over the trampled earth and the two prone bodies.

"Got 'em both, eh?" he said with satisfaction. "Well, I reckon that settles that little problem we were talking about."

Carter stared at him without really seeing him. "Does it?" he asked. I didn't kill Cassidy. The other fellow did it when he thought Cassidy was caught and might talk."

"And you shot the other hombre? But why did you use Cassidy's gun instead of yore own?" Grassroots puzzled.

"Sheriff!" Henry Bromfield was calling excitedly. "Come here. Cassidy's still alive. Wants to talk to you."

Carter knelt down beside the dying man. The lanterns caught the shine of his eyes, the fear and despair in them.

"I don't give a plugged peso for you, Carter," the outlaw breathed laboriously. "But I don't wanna go—where I'm goin'—with this on my mind. Figger, mebbe it'll do me some good when I get there—to get this off my chest first."

"I'm listening," Carter said dryly.

"That kid—Curly Graham—yuh killed. He was no innocent bystander. We made that up to put yuh in a hole at the trial. He was leader of the gang. Only a kid—but a bad hombre with a cutter. Killed twelve men, they told me. That's the truth, I swear it." Sweat rolled on his forehead. "First time I told the truth in a long time. Think it'll—help me—Carter?"

"It's supposed to," Carter said softly.

Then he was walking away from the little group and the lantern light and looked up at the stars. They were still remote and indifferent, but it didn't matter so much now. The weight had rolled off his mind and heart and he was himself again.

Grassroots Polk stood at his elbow.

"To answer your question," Carter said, "why I used Cassidy's gun—"

He slid his own gun from its holster and held it out to Polk.

The cowboy took it, looked a question at the sheriff. Then, as if catching the idea, he slid out the cylinder. It was empty.

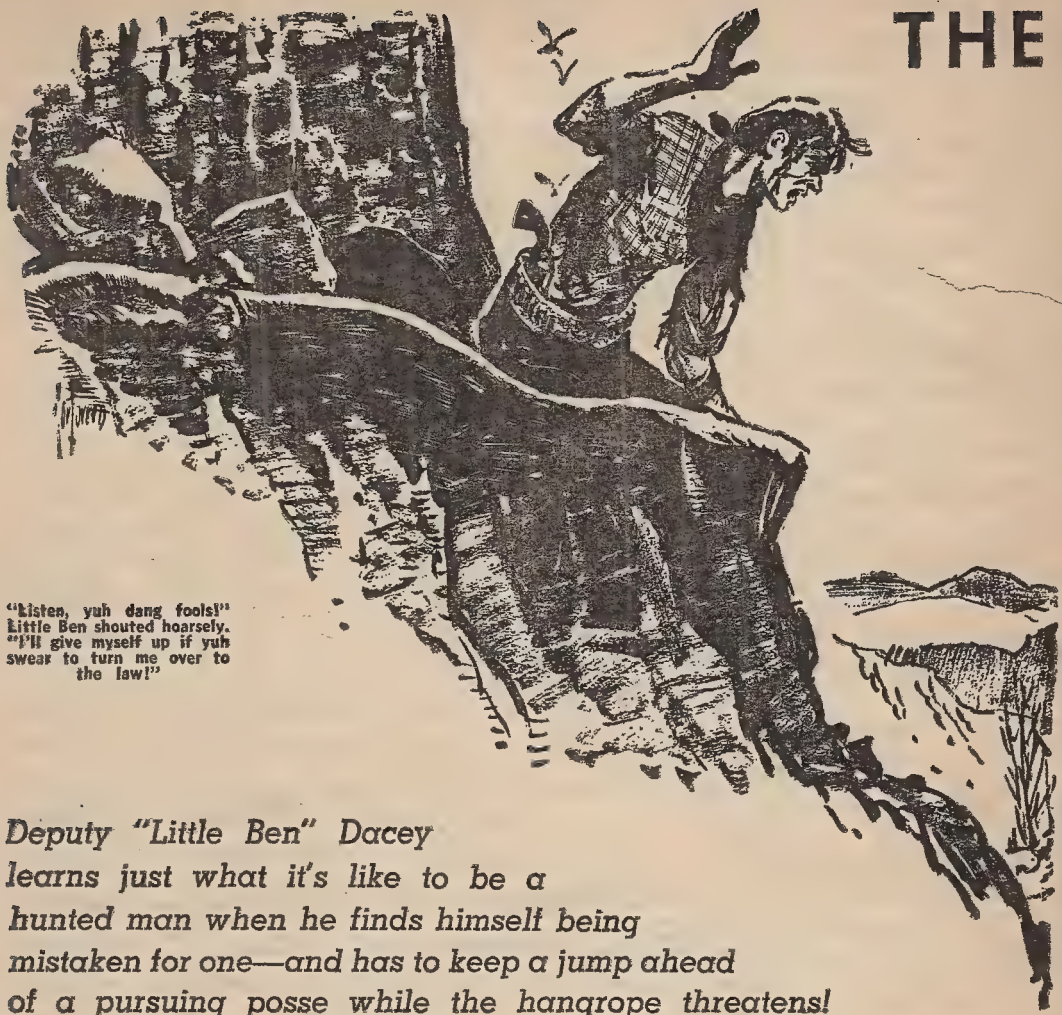
"You been carrying an unloaded gun around all this time?"

Carter nodded mutely.

Polk didn't say the many things he'd have liked to say. He merely swallowed once or twice and handed the gun back.

"You can load her now," he said.

THE



"Listen, yuh dang fools!" Little Ben shouted hoarsely. "I'll give myself up if yuh swear to turn me over to the law!"

Deputy "Little Ben" Dacey learns just what it's like to be a hunted man when he finds himself being mistaken for one—and has to keep a jump ahead of a pursuing posse while the hangrope threatens!

CHAPTER I

Telltale Scar

HE WAS close to the kill. "Bull Joe" Collis was wounded, traveling slower. And the fugitive had no idea a John Law was pushing hard on his coat tails. To cap it all, Deputy "Little Ben" Dacey had learned that Collis planned to hole up somewhere close to the town of Medicine Hill.

Little Ben stretched his six-foot whalebone frame in the saddle of the claybank. In a few hours he should be walking into Bull Joe's hideout and shoving a gun muzzle under his hooked nose.

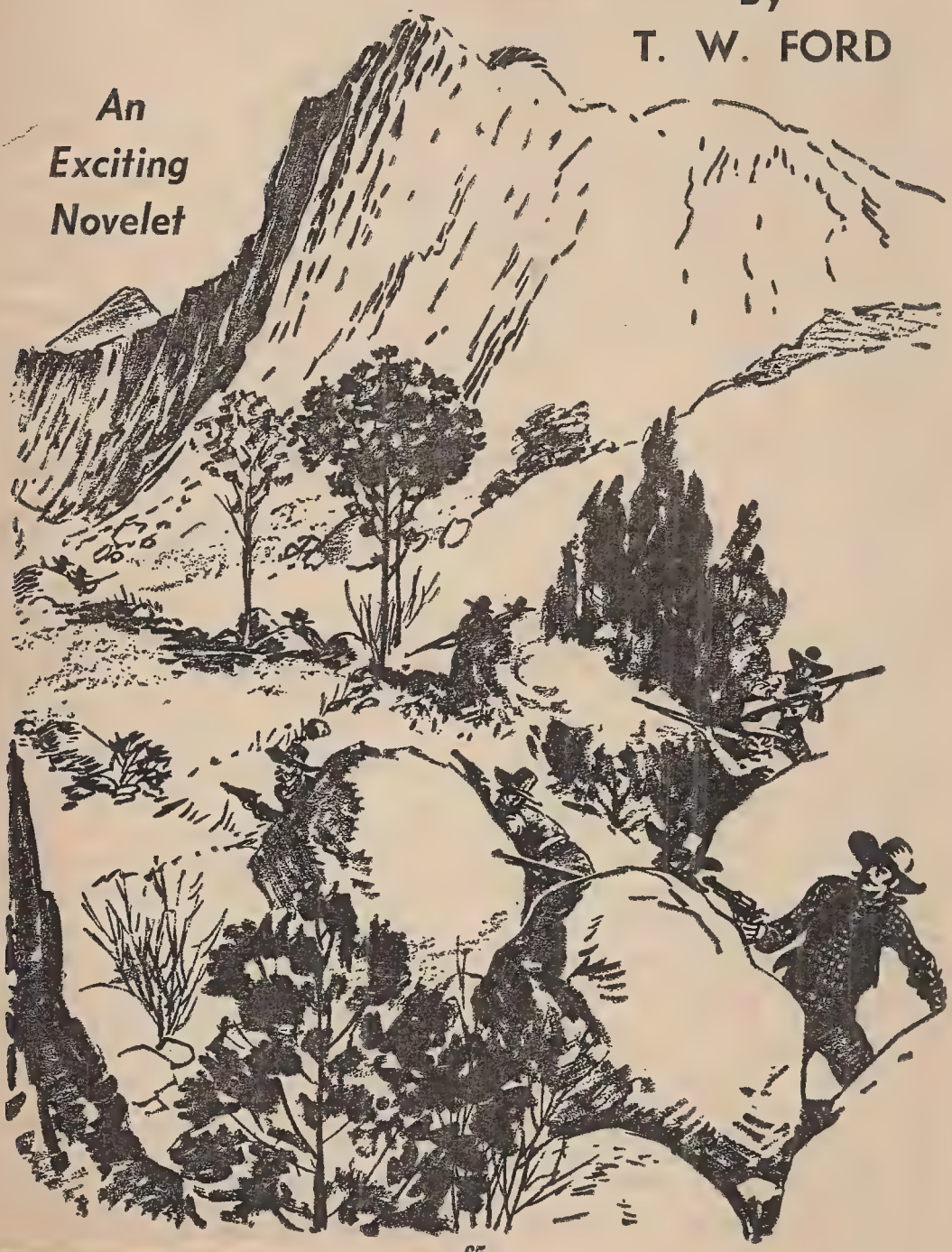
At the thought, Little Ben's boyish, leather-hued face drew into a mask of concentration. Bull Joe Collis would be tough taking. He was a slick pelican with the hardware. There was that time two months back in that settlement in the Wild Horse Hills. Ben and another deputy had sloped in, on the tip that Collis had been seen there. And Collis, warned somehow, had come crow-hopping out of a barber shop on his wounded leg, face still lather-smeared, and started triggering. He had knocked Ben out of saddle with a slug through shoulder flesh, and sent the other deputy diving up an alley for his life. Then he had grabbed a pony and hightailed.

Yeah, Bull Joe Collis would be hard to take. So long as he had a single slug left, he would be slamming a trigger. If he had to have his light put out, he would want to take some-

COTTONWOOD DEPUTY

By
T. W. FORD

An Exciting Novelet



body along with him.

Ben tipped his flat-crowned sombrero against the wave of sand whipped up by the wind, sleeved the sand from his teeth, and came to a decision that Bull Joe backed against a wall would be too dangerous. Only thing to do would be to throw lead pronto. Arrest him after he had been dropped. Of course, Collis might get killed, but that way seemed the only answer.

The desert was dropping behind now and Little Ben was moving through country dotted with scrub growth and clumps of jackpine. A little later, the trail dipped over the lip of a bluff and down to Straight Creek, a wide yellow stream below. Across it lay Medicine Hill, sprawled across the face of a long slope. Then Little Ben Dacey was reining back his claybank from the bluff edge to get out of sight. Below riders were debarking from the cable ferry on his side of the stream.

Peering around the trunk of a giant eucalyptus, he saw that they had the earmarks of a posse. Little Ben had nothing to fear from any posse, but he had been traveling incognito, not wearing his deputy badge. And if he had to identify himself now, word could spread like a grass fire and Collis might be tipped off.

Then the westering sun licked over the stocks of the rifles in the saddle boots of the posse and the men were wheeling off down the stream bank, yelling like mad. And that bunch was not sparing the horseflesh.

AFTER a few minutes, Ben Dacey rode down to the ferry, tapping his bone-handled Colts back firmly into holsters. The squat, one-eyed ferryman grunted a greeting as Dacey walked his pony aboard. The mooring rope was snickered free of the stump on the bank, the squat gent heaved on the cable, and the flat-bottomed ferry creaked out onto the stream. The deputy dismounted, dropping down beside the claybank on polelike legs in gray close-fitting pants.

"Get a look at the bunch that just crossed over?" the ferryman asked. At young Dacey's nod, he added, "A posse! Proddy trigger fingers and headin' for trouble."

Young Ben Dacey still refused to show any curiosity. He had learned a lot in his two years as a deputy to Sam Higgins, sheriff of Big Trigger County. And he remembered the things his father, a former deputy and sheriff, had told him.

"Know who they're after?" the boatman said, as he tugged. "That deputy marshal from down at Edson who went bad! Swift Wagner! Word come in he was down around Dresson's Mill. Them posse boys are het up, too. They catch Wagner and they'll make a cottonwood apple of him on the spot—if they don't fill his hide with a cargo of lead first!"

"Hope they catch him," said Little Ben Dacey coldly, in his soft, deep voice.

He knew "Swift" Wagner's story, and without knowing the man, he hated him. When a lawman went bad, it was a reflection on every other badge packer, broke down respect for the law. And the law was a sacred thing to Little Ben. He watched the approaching bank, stained in the ruddy afterglow of the sun, face solemn beyond his years because of the work he did.

"Medicine is shore riled up about Swift Wagner," the boatman went on. "Ain't a two-legged he-animal in the town that wouldn't like to get his hands on Wagner's throat. Yes-siree—yuh see, that rancher and his wife he shot up over on Whisky Creek—yuh heard that?"

Little Ben Dacey nodded.

"Well, that rancher's wife, she was a Medicine Hill girl. Laura Sederill she was before she got hitched. Real nice girl too. So this town is really boilin' about Swift Wagner."

The scow bottom scraped on the sand flat. Dacey led his pony off, then turned quickly up under the willows on the bank. Several men were coming down to board the boat, and the less seen of him until he got word about Bull Joe's last hideout, the better.

"His *last* hideout," Little Ben muttered softly.

Because it would be his last. Ben meant to grab him and take him back to stand trial for killing the teller in that bank holdup at Sutter. Collis had been recognized when his bandanna mask had slipped. It would mean the rope for Collis.

A queer exultation drummed in Little Ben's veins. In the Big Trigger country he was already being compared to his father, the late "Red Ben" Dacey. And when he brought in the wire-tough Bull Joe, they would call him a real manhunter.

As he rode into a winding byway of the shacktown, a pallid moon hung in the sky like a jewel. The path widened into a ragged road and left the mud of the flats to climb the slope behind the main street. Halfway up, Little Ben turned a corner where three or

four men stood talking.

"If they catch Swift Wagner," one of them was saying, "they should drag him back to town so we can ride him on a rail before stringin' him up—then burn the body! A lawman who goes bad is worse'n a snake in the grass, by grab!"

Little Ben thought of Wagner as he walked his pony on down the side road. Wagner, a big six-footer, swarthy like himself, had been a deputy to the town marshal at Edson for four or five years. A fast, sure man when it came to slipping gun steel from a holster too. Then it had come out that Wagner was working with a rustling outfit. He lit out before they could grab him, and had been hiding up in the broken country with a couple of gunmen pards and looting and raiding, mocking the law.

Little Ben dropped silently from the hull to walk his pony opposite a closed-up blacksmith's barn. Ahead was a barber shop, unlighted now, the shade of the big window drawn.

A sign over the doorway said:

DIEGO MARTIN'S, SHAVE & HAIRCUT, BATH—25c.

As the door of the darkened barber shop opened noiselessly, Little Ben faded among the trees. A man slid out, called back in a whisper to somebody inside, then walked off quickly. The deputy remained motionless for a brief spell. Diego Martin was valuable to the law upon occasion. No sense in making him suspect among his own kind by being seen as a visitor to Diego.

LEAVING his pony ground-anchored, Ben passed the barber shop and went on to Diego Martin's living quarters in the rear. As he was crossing an open patch in the moonglow a slightly inebriated man stumbled out from between a couple of houses. He gave Little Ben a vague side glance as he passed the deputy, then his eyes fastened on the scar on Ben's right cheek. Ben had got that when he hit a stone in the road the sultry afternoon Bull Joe Collis had shot him out of the saddle.

Staring at the scar, the man's eyes widened. He half recoiled, then headed on at a hurried walk verging on a run. Concentrating on the business at hand, Little Ben came around behind the barber shop and hammered sharply at a door there, bone-handled gun leveled up in his right hand.

"It's Ben Dacey, Diego—deputy from Trigger. Open up!"

No lights went on. There was no sound of feet approaching the door. But after some seconds, the cross-bar inside was inched back furtively. Dacey pushed on the door and it swung wide, yawning on darkness.

"Show some light, or I start scatterin' lead," he snapped.

A boot creaked and a floor plank sighed. An inside door opened onto another room and an ochre band of light streaked out. Bow-legged, always smiling Diego Martin stepped into it.

"Come in, Dacey, come in."

CHAPTER II

Wrong Deputy

LITTLE BEN entered, and he and Diego went into the second room, the barber's dingy living quarters. Diego gestured at a jug on the table, offered Little Ben a drink, then began to talk fast.

"Got some news for you, Mr. Dacey. That Sam Kennedy, he sloped through here, headed for the Border. Yep. And Young Whalen, the horsethief? Well,"—the unctuous smile widened on Diego's treacherous face—"he was seen over at the crossing on the Alamo Trail and—"

"Who yuh think yuh're hurrawin', polecat?" Little Ben sneered, running a finger along his gun barrel.

Diego Martin assumed a pained look.

"I tell w'at I—"

The deputy kicked a chair aside.

"Think I'm a jugheaded fool? It was a month back that Kennedy busted for the Border. And Whalen is dead."

The breed feigned surprise.

"That so? Now w'at you know 'bout that? Me, I didn't know."

"Yuh're one two-faced lying little polecat! Diego, I'm here on the trail of Bull Joe Collis. Sabe?"

Diego shrugged.

"Bull Joe? He is over this way?"

Little Ben slapped his palm with the Colt's barrel.

"All right. Mebbe I got to wrap this hogleg around yore head a couple times to jar yore memory, Diego. And it'd be a heap big pleasure, I can tell yuh!"

"Mr. Dacey, mebbe he come through here," Diego said nervously. "But there are some t'ings I don't know sometimes."

"The law does know, though, about that knife-cuttin' job of yores at Piñon Gulch about five years back, Diego," Little Ben said sternly. "So-o, if yuh ain't goin' to be any use to us here mebbe yuh'd just as well be behind bars!"

The little breed's yellowish eyes glittered for a moment. He cut a glance toward a dishpan on a wall peg. Underneath that dishpan was a filled holster. Then he shrugged again.

"All right," he said. "I get saddled up. W'at I don' know, I can't tell."

"No rush," Little Ben told him. "I got important business to tend to now. The law's in no hurry to pick up a two-bit like you." He reached for the door behind him. "'Course, in the meantime, word might get around how yuh been workin' under cover with us badge packers. How yuh've been tippin' us off about some of the owlhooters and sundry jaspers on the run. Word might get around. And if it should—well, Diego, the law never prosecutes a dead man. So long."

"Wait!" Panic was a hoarse whistle in the breed's voice. "All right. Bull Joe came—he came through Medicine Hill. He ain't here now though."

"Where is he?"

Diego had the smile plastered on his face again.

"A man, he is scared and he is riding fas'. Mebbe he rides north. Mebbe south. Then he turns east—west. *Quien sabe?*"

As Little Ben reached for the door again, from down the road came a man's shout. It was broken off as if he had been warned. Then came an angry mutter as if from many men. That too, died.

"So long, Diego. Too bad—for you—that yuh couldn't help the law this time."

Diego swore, and sweat suddenly beaded his face.

"Bull Joe, he went up the creek to Widdows' store at—at the fork of the creek."

Little Ben drew in a sharp breath.

"Yeah? He's holin' up there?"

Diego's breath rasped, and he nodded. Little Ben was surprised about it being Widdows' place. Widdows had done time up in Montana himself. Suspected more than once of hiding fugitives, Widdows was taking a big chance giving haven to Bull Joe who was wanted for a killing.

Diego Martin showed himself a rat to the core then.

"You'll be sure and get him, Dacey, sure." He had betrayed the man and now wanted to be sure he himself would be protected from retribution. "Be very, very careful, Dacey. Frank Widdows will go a long way for Bull Joe. Once Bull Joe saved Widdows' hide down south of the Line. Mebbe you oughta take a posse with you."

Little Ben shook his head, and left the breed's place. Again he felt that drumbeat of exultation. Bull Joe was in the bag now, practically, and Ben had no intention of going after him with any posse. He would get his man alone, and when he brought in tough Bull Joe, they would call him a great man-hunter. It would be a big feather in his hat, all right. Sheriff Higgins himself had given up on Bull Joe, said it was a dead trail. But Ben had stuck with it. Red Ben, his father, had always said that if you waited long enough the rat would poke his head out of some hole. And Little Ben had played it like his dad always said to. Travel soft, and figure the hunted man will get careless and leave sign somewhere.

WELL, that was the way he had played it all right. Folks had always dubbed him Little Ben, though he was a big man. That was because they had watched him growing up beside his dad. But maybe when he brought in Bull Joe they would be calling him Big Ben.

Abruptly he brought himself up short. He must have passed the place where he had left the claybank. There was something like a whisper on the night. But it was covered immediately by the swish of branches overhead in the night breeze.

He back-tracked, puzzled. He was so eager to be off up the creek road that he failed to note the shifting of something darker in a splotch of shadow. Then he was back where he had left his pony. There was fresh horse sign there, but no horse!

Some sixth sense rang a warning bell in his brain. Even as he barely sensed it, he was hunched, hands digging at his holsters. And a slug whizzed a couple of inches from his head. He flung himself sideward as he cleared gun steel.

"Give yoreself up, yuh dirty skulking deputy!" a man roared on top of the gun report.

Little Ben triggered at the red lick of muzzle flash from another weapon across the road.

A trap! Probably rigged by Bull Joe and that breed.

"Go to blazes!" he roared back. "Yuh'll never take me alive!"

He was sidling fast toward the corner of a house. A lawman always had to fear that a cornered badman would gather a pack to fight back in a last desperate play.

"That's him—Swift Wagner!" another voice boomed out. Simultaneously the wind opened a gap in the foliage overhead. Moonlight fell over the deputy. "See the scar on his face? It's Wagner all right, by grab! Burn him down, boys!"

All else was wiped out in the storm of lead around the deputy. He understood then. He had been mistaken for Swift Wagner, the deputy marshal from Edson who had gone bad! Ben remembered that man who had stared at him and rushed away so fast.

The deputy began to bellow, trying to tell them he wasn't Swift Wagner. It would have been in vain even if the guns had not dominated all else. This pack was liquored up, insane with the killing lust and mob fever, convinced that Swift Wagner was treed.

A slug vented Ben's sombrero and he realized it came from the back of the house. He sent a bullet ripping down there and two guns answered him. He jumped up onto the little porch, tasting desperation for the first time. His teeth snapped together as lead seared the calf of his left leg. He was backed against a wall, fighting for his hide. Eventually the mistake would be discovered, but that wouldn't interest him after he was dead.

They were so blood-hungry they were firing wildly. That was the only reason he was still alive. Two men ducked from the line of trees, cutting for the porch, doubled low, guns thrust before them. Just as Little Ben was about to fire, lead gouged into the wood of the door frame, spraying splinters into his face. When he got his eyes opened again, one of the charging pair was sinking, drilled in the back by the wild firing. The other man had fled.

"I ain't Wagner, yuh locoed fools!" Little Ben called. "I'm a deputy from Big Trigger. I can show yuh my badge!"

He felt for its hard outline in the pocket of his gray pants. It wasn't there.

Then a mocking laugh rang out. He had not produced the badge. "I seen Swift Wagner over to Edson a few times," a thin voice called out of the blackness. "I'd never forget that scar. He's Wagner, the lyin' coyote!"

Then they were slipping through the gloom, closing in from three sides. Warier now. And smarter. Gun muzzles kicked crimson froth like oversized vivid fireflies. As the cornered Ben Dacey shifted, the door behind his shoulder blade seemed to give. It unlocked! He fired once, then eeled around to jump inside and slam the door behind him. He threw off the panic flooding him, pulled the door open a foot, and put a slug in the arm of a man just leaping onto the porch steps. The fellow slammed backward, screaming like a banshee. That should check the charge momentarily.

But this place would be a trap once they recovered enough to throw a ring around it. Ben ran across a front room, found a door, and was in the kitchen. There he took careful aim in the dimness and sent a slug through the front door. There was a scream of pain.

"Look out!" somebody yelled. "The coyote is making a stand!"

Little Ben rammed fresh cartridges into his smoking weapons, then found the back door and leaped out into the night. Luck seemed to be with him. A scudding cloud had blotted out the moon. He ran across the yard, shooting looks over a shoulder. Nobody appeared. There were no shots.

Around a shed the ground dropped off, so that the deputy was below the level of the yard. He turned toward the main road. Once there, he could identify himself. Then the town would be after those whisky-roiled hotheads who had tried to burn down a lawman.

THE jaundiced eye of the moon was abruptly cleared as it peeped around the scud. The landscape was bathed in a silvery luminescence. The running deputy felt naked, stripped, as the darkness was peeled away. And then he saw he wasn't the only one out there.

Off to his left, moving in a fan formation toward the back of the house, a band of armed men were advancing from behind a livery barn on the main road. Sighting him, they were so surprised they didn't realize at once he was the fugitive. He nodded calmly.

One man had opened his mouth to ask something when the back door of the house slapped back with a bang.

"Wagner ain't inside!" a man howled.

One of the band outside snapped his teeth on a half-spat oath. And hoglegs were jumping up. Ben's gun crackled, then he was-

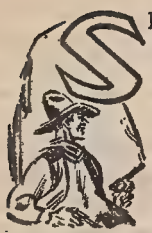
running, ducking behind a hummock. Like an angry hornet lead buzzed by his cheek.

"It's Wagner!"

Seven weapons chopped away, powder flame lashing the night.

CHAPTER III

Cornered Prey



SLITHERING through a patch of high grass, Little Ben Dacey saw a man darting from the end of the line of men to swing in front of him. He fired for the man's legs. The fellow tripped as if he had hit an invisible rope. His legs thrashed thin air. Then he rolled over and over with a broken leg. The others hung back briefly. Little Ben hurtled for a patch of starved cottonwoods.

He had almost reached the cover when lead caught up with him. One slug fanned through his shirt sleeve. Then the hogleg in his left hand was kicking up, and there was blood on his white calfskin vest. The sudden numbness in his left arm was replaced by fiery pain. A bullet had slashed through the flesh. Even as he staggered another slug slit open his cheek and he had a salty taste on his lips. But he plunged on in among the cottonwoods.

Before he had gone ten yards a man who had cut down from the side street came lunging through the trees. Little Ben sighted him first. The flash of the other man's Colt ran like a red dagger past the deputy's shoulder. And Little Ben clubbed away with his gun barrel madly. He saw the flattened body and fled on, feeling like a crippled, hounded animal, desperate for a hiding place.

He emerged from the cottonwood stand to find himself behind the buildings flanking the main street. In the lighted doorway at the rear of a dance hall several men stood staring, guns drawn, listening to the gun battle. Running low, he veered away, ducking behind a high heap of rusting tin cans.

Yelling, a man began to fire. But he was aiming at something that had stirred beyond the other end of the cottonwood clump. Medicine Hill had gone trigger-crazy in the manhunt.

Dacey knew he had to find a place to make a stand fast, or he would be hemmed in and lead would make a sieve of him. He cut along behind the backs of buildings. The whole thing was loco, of course. They just couldn't be hunting down a representative of the law as if he were some horsethief or common killer. But they were.

A man's bull voice rose above the general uproar. He was on the little knoll behind the livery barn. And he was gesturing toward the patch of moonlight through which Little Ben had just scooted. The deputy hugged a clump of brush for a moment, eyes seeking some refuge hungrily. A haunted feeling he had never before experienced swept through him.

A few yards off was a stack of empty packing cases. Too flimsy, though, for him to make a stand behind them. But beyond them was the rear of a dark store, and the door stood open. Hugging the earth, cloaking himself in each patch of shadow, he worked quickly toward the open door. When he sprang through it, he had a vague glimpse of a night-shirted figure inside, and a carbine barrel swung clumsily down.

It caught him a glancing blow on his hat, slid on down to give him a stunning wallop on his right shoulder. Ben staggered drunkenly, and the wielder of the carbine, dropping it, fled to the front of the store.

Little Ben Dacey knew for sure then what it was to be a fugitive. Every man's hand was turned against you.

The instinct of the fugitive told him to get the back door closed. He did. His senses reeled and his knees half buckled with every step because of the blow from the carbine. There was a crazy singing inside his head and pinwheels of vari-colored lights exploded before his eyes. He moved forward, poking a wobbling gun barrel in front of him, trying to keep clear of the counter where the man had ducked.

All that had saved Little Ben Dacey then was that the proprietor of the store had had no ammunition for his weapon.

Refracted moonglow came through the store windows and lay on the floor like a gray band. Through the windows he made out vague figures swirling by in the road. He could see the bolts of cloth on the shelves. He briefly weighed the idea of getting behind a counter with them to make a stand.

Then he gave up that idea. It had to be some place where he could hold them off until heads cooled and he got a chance to prove his identity.

He heard the asthmatic wheezing of the huddled storekeeper.

"Put yore danged head up and I'll blow yore brains out into the front road!" Little Ben called hoarsely.

There was an opening in the counter midway down. Beyond it Ben made out a side door. He moved through the opening, watched the end of the counter where the hidden man was a moment before, then turned the key in the door and flung it open. Chill night air fanned his blood-smeared face. He hurried out, locked the door from the outside, and flung the key away.

The next instant he realized he had done what Red Ben had asserted a fugitive never failed to do eventually. Panic and haste contributed to it. Flight, the blind impulse to keep moving, was an intoxicating fever in the blood. A man missed a chance that might have stemmed the tide.

HE HAD. That quaking storekeeper could have been his guarantee of life. He could have waited in there with his gun in the man's back, threatening to burn him down if they rushed him.

There was no time for regretting his lost chance now, though.

He was in the gloom beneath the wide overhanging eaves. In the rear a couple of running men passed. And an authoritative voice was bawling orders to throw a ring around the buildings.

Next door there was a low place with a darkened side window. The window scraped up when the deputy tried it. Levering a leg over the sill, he dropped inside, pulled down the lower frame. He half tripped over one chair, banged against a second, almost fell over a third. It seemed as if he must be in a forest of chairs. It seemed, too, as if wild horses were stampeding inside his battered skull. But he made out the faint gleam of a doorknob.

His left arm was limp. He had to stick his gun inside his waistband to twist the knob with his right hand. When he pulled open the door bright light blinded him.

"Hold it, Wagner! Yuh're covered dead to rights!"

Little Ben felt himself sway against the door frame. Then his sight cleared as a gun nosed into his ribs. He saw that he had stepped into a barroom from the private room with all the chairs. But all the customers had cleared out to get into the manhunt except for three or four men who were around him. These men were older, solider citizens, two of them with paunches, one with a white mustache.

"Keep yore head, Wagner," the man with the gun in Ben's side warned. "This town's gone crazy. It's mob rule tonight!"

It was an effort for Ben to say:

"I'm not Wagner! I'm Ben Dac—"

"Watch him—he's a snake!" spat out one of the fat men. He held a derringer in a pudgy hand. But it was rock-steady on the middle button of the deputy's shirt. He went on: "Gents, we ain't a-goin' to have mob rule in this town! Lynchin's dangerous medicine. Wagner's got to be turned over to the proper authorities and tried legal-like!"

"I'm not Swift Wagner I tell yuh!"

The man with the mustache sneered, and the one beside Ben ordered:

"Josh, get to the front door! Don't let nobody in. We'll keep him back here and mebbe when they cool down, they'll listen to reason."

Little Ben Dacey seemed to be toppling over a black pit. Somebody got him under the armpits to hold him up. Then he fought off the nausea, clambered back out of the blackness, and was again aware of the angry dull roar welling along the road. The manhunters were snarling about for the prey that seemed to have eluded them.

"Where's Josh?" a man asked.

Ben pried his eyes wider and saw that the man who had gone to the batwings was no longer there. Another ran to the front. Out in the road, a man's voice struck through the welling sound. One of the men with Little Ben said that was the voice of "Shell" Slade, the gun guard from the gambling hall.

"He's right in here somewheres!" the gun guard's voice boomed. "Flush out the danged coyote! The boss is promisin' free drinks for a month to the jasper who drills him! Yuh find anybody tryin' to protect him, blast them too!"

The batwing doors were swinging. The other man who had gone to them had vanished, wanting to get clear. There was a husky oath from the man whose gun was muzzling Little Ben's side. The gun was moved away. It was plain that nobody but a fool was going to get himself plugged trying to save a killer.

One of the fat men muttered something and edged into the side room. Outside a gun began barking as somebody thought he had the fugitive located.

"Don't know as we can keep 'em off," one

of the men in the barroom said.

Little Ben was not going to be caught like a sick dog in a hole. He managed to summon strength enough to knock up the gun nose in his side. Grabbing the hogleg out of his waistband, he caught one of the men a glancing blow, then jumped back and sideward. In two shots he shattered the hanging lamp over the bar. Burning oil splashed floorward, licking fitfully in the abrupt darkness. Boot heels made wild spattering sounds on the floor as they fled for the front door.

"Run! Keep on the move! Stop and you'll be cut down!"

The commands, watchwords of a fugitive, streaked through Dacey's mind like fire. He was in motion before he knew it.

THE panes of a window shimmered grayly in the dark. The firing continued up the road as he beat out the window with the gun and clambered out.

Rank high grass and brush choked the open ground beside the saloon. He plunged through it and came onto the fire-gutted shell of a cabin. He stood inside it as men raced by toward the firing. In front of the saloon, the men who had guarded him a minute ago were shouting vainly in the general confusion.

A man gambled, took long chances, when he was hunted. He bucked the odds to stay out of the grave. He grabbed any break flung his way, grabbed it before it evaporated or before he lacked the breath of life to seize it.

Little Ben grabbed and gambled. He plunged out into the blinding wave of alkali kicked up by the manhunters, ran across the road, and staggered against a watering trough on the other side as the dust thinned.

A man's face poked out of the dust screen.

"That polecat wound yuh, feller?"

Little Ben nodded and pointed up the road. The man bit off an oath and ran on by.

The deputy started down the line. He wanted cover. The double doors of a garishly lighted dance hall stood wide open. He could see that the place was empty, even the barkeep gone. Everybody was out to see the hunting down of a wanted man.

Here was the quickest refuge available, although a very dangerous one. Little Ben felt that he had no choice. He stumbled toward the wide doors, hand on his gun butt, ready to shoot to protect himself.

CHAPTER IV

Trail's End?

ALOCOED thought entered Dacey's aching head as he entered the dance hall. It would be nice to have a quiet place to sit down. To rest and draw a deep, lazy breath instead of having his lungs straining for the hot air that struggled with the cold terror choking his throat. He walked down the length of the barnlike place, automatically thumbing fresh shells into his single gun.

"Swift!"

A red-headed, hard-faced dance hall girl stood on the bottom step of an enclosed stairway. She shot a look out to the front, then came quickly toward him.

"Swift!" she said again.

He didn't bother denying it. Nobody would believe him. He just flicked his gun muzzle her way. Then he realized she was on his side because she came on undeterred. He heard himself, as if from a long way off, asking her what she wanted.

"Come with me, quick! Quick, Swift!"

She had his arm, was steering him. They went to a door just behind the back of the bar. She opened it and said something about steps down.

She steadied him when he fumbled. Then they were down in the still coolness of a cellar. He heard her sliding back a bar.

"Bend low," she whispered, and they were in a tunnel.

Dacey recalled this dance hall now. Once he and Sheriff Higgins had walked here to take a man they had seen enter. But he seemed to have vanished in thin air.

The tunnel was not long. Just as Dacey bumped his bared head the second time the girl warned about steps again. They were cut out of dirt. And then he drew the night air into his lungs as they came to the surface in a clump of alder. The girl nodded toward a horse shed.

"You'll find ponies there, Swift. A saddled one. I'm Hop Gainor's girl. You remember Hop, don't you?"

His nod was automatic. Her fingers clawed into his arm.

"Hop always said you had dinero cached away, Swift, when you get away, don't forget me'n Hop. You know where you can send

mail to Hop."

"Shore, shore."

Then he pushed out of the alders and ran to the shed. There was no shooting on the road now. It was ominously still. The trigger-crazy pack would be scouting around, alert as predatory animals. Ben grabbed a pony and dragged himself into the kak.

A little distance back from the dance hall he came out on a wide alley that straggled off from the main road. He rounded a turn in it and in a patch of moonlight, saw three men riding into town. Little Ben swung the cayuse between two huts, touched it with spurs as it mounted the slope of Medicine Hill. The smothering blackness crept up over him like a drugging ebon tide. . . .

When he fought out of it, the pony had found the main road. Wretched and weak, Dacey swore. Fate had swung back against him. He was in the open, in the full beam of the moon, a black figure on the white alkali carpet of the broad trail.

A gun spat quickly twice down in town, then twice more, in signal. He could see running figures on the street, running in his direction. Others were hitting their saddles for pursuit.

He swallowed hard and threw spur steel to the cayuse. He had a thin chance, mounted, and in the open. Once he got up in those saw-toothed hills like a ragged hedge against the night horizon, his chance would be bettered.

He had just topped the slope with the flats stretching ahead, when the cayuse went lame!

The rocky floor of the canyon where it broadened into a small bowl glittered in the moonlight. Little Ben swung the painfully trotting horse over toward one reddish wall, dropped off, and gave it a slap over the rump to send it trotting on down the defile. Then he began to climb on his unsteady legs.

This piece of country was almost as familiar to him as his own backyard. He had ridden through here many times with his father when he had been barely stirrup high. It had been his only chance when his pony suddenly had gone lame—but he had made it. A little-used trail ran down it. And up along this shelf along which he clambered was a small cave. His dad had told him how one "Black John" Trapp once had held off a posse for nine days in the cave.

The shelf shot upward steeply and he fell to all fours to clamber along it. Once he almost pitched over the lip when the pounding inside his skull swelled like thunder. It went away, but another dull pounding came from outside his head. Finally it registered on his consciousness as hoofbeats of the pursuit.

His breath seemed to scorch his lungs. Sweat plastered the clothes to his rangy body. Then he was abreast the dark mouth of the little cave and cackling a little crazily as he collapsed. Abruptly he realized his throat was parched, that he needed water badly. And it might be days more before he got any. He shut off that thought, listening to the slam of his heart against the floor of the ledge. Those manhunters would follow the canyon after his horse. They had to. . . .

DOWN at the south side of the canyon, a hoeman sat in his halted wagon, watching the figure up on the ledge. The hoeman pulled at a scrawny beard, nodding as he heard the approach of the posse. The story was plain. And there might be a few dollars reward for tipping them off. He climbed down from the wagon, waiting. . . .

The cave had changed. It was barely a cave any more. When Little Ben, hearing the voices of the nearing pack reverberating off the canyon walls, forced himself up to enter it he found that the hole in the wall had caved in. It was barely more than a shallow niche now.

Crouched on all fours, with his legs cramped up, he fitted himself into it. His head was almost onto the shelf, exposed. It was a sickening blow. That Trapp hombre had been able to stand seige those nine days because he had withdrawn into the back end and killed two deputies who had tried to get in at him. Now it was different.

The van of the Medicine Hill posse galloped into the canyon bowl. Ben's hand clawed around his gun. But he froze his trigger finger in time against the cold senseless rage that told him to blast at them. There were not many shells left in his belt.

The injustice of the thing was like a hot iron. They were hunting down an innocent man. He wondered how many fugitives, alleged outlaws, must have felt as he did now.

He laughed as he saw them drive their ponies toward the other end of the bowl. And then he saw the wagon down by the brush at that end. The hoeman had stepped out, was waving his arms. The riders reined in. Then their heads jerked over their shoul-

ders as they looked toward the cave on the shelf.

There were shouted orders. The riders, and there were a lot of them, began to swing in a big arc. They were not going on down the canyon. When they left, they would be riding back up it—with a dead man trussed over a saddle.

No wild terror torrented through little Ben Dacey's veins now. He felt only numbness. Trail's end had come. There would be a few more hours, another sunrise, perhaps. But death was the inevitable conclusion to this one-sided game.

He knew then that this was the way many a hunted man must have felt. Clutching to the thinning thread of life by raw instinct. Doomed to perish like a miserable animal caught in its hole.

Rebellion leaped in Ben Dacey. He scrambled out onto the shelf, reared to his knees, and bawled out. All movement below halted. A tall man, stringy as a fence post, strode out from a bunch. Shell Slade, he figured.

"Listen, yuh dang fools!" Little Ben shouted hoarsely. No sense in trying to convince them he wasn't Swift Wagner. "Listen! I'll give myself up *If* yuh swear not to swing me on a rope, but turn me over to the law!" He had to struggle for fresh voice because his throat was so dry. "Yuh'll save bloodshed. Swear to turn me over to the law and I'll give up!"

Slade's mouth opened as if to answer, but the rest answered for him, answered with jeers and mocking oaths, hurled insults. A rifle spanged and stone chips leaped from the wall a yard from Ben Dacey. He went flat, worming back into the short tunnel.

Coughs tore at his parched throat, making it seem drier. He watched the posse deploy well out of accurate short-gun range. Dismounted, they fanned in a big semi-circle facing the cave. They got behind boulders, clumps of brush.

And their Winchesters began to bark. It was no steady firing. A man would throw lead when he thought he had a chance to get some exposed chunk of flesh.

IT WAS spasmodic, broken firing. Rock spattered over Dacey. Each report made him writhe closer against the shelf, try to back in deeper. Because of the angle—they were some seventy feet below—they couldn't get him as long as he kept down. But the shooting gave him no rest, twanged his ragged nerves.

And he knew that any renewed appeal would be futile. They had smelled blood, these manhunters. And they had taken the law into their own hands. They meant to rod that law to its bloody finish.

The moonlight grew sickly wan. The men below no longer had faces. Sometimes Ben Dacey half dozed. As in a dream, he saw himself sloping down to the ferry again. It seemed years ago. He remembered how he had decided to start slinging lead the instant he walked in on Bull Joe Collis, to wound him without warning. These men had tried to do that to him. Of course, the difference was that Bull Joe was guilty of a killing. Not adjudged guilty at a regular trial, but it was plain he was a killer.

A dislodged stone rattling down the canyon side jerked him from his half coma. The instant he got his gun arm propped on an elbow, rifle lead spattered off the stone about him like rain. They were covering something. And when he edged his head further out he glimpsed the sombrero of the first man working his way up the steep shelf. He triggered again and again, forced in fresh shells, and threw more lead.

When he stopped, he heard a groan from the shelf.

"We'll get yuh down, Jed," a man was whispering hoarsely.

That stopped them. But it had been close, terribly close. Little Ben Dacey found himself wondering why he clung to the ebbing moments of life so doggedly. But he guessed all hunted men did.

There was nothing more after that. Just the waiting. And out across the canyon floor, the pack waiting like coyotes to close on the carcass of a down animal. Occasionally the *spat-t* of a Winchester coming hard on the *whang* of its projectile against the stone of his shelter.

The blackness thinned, waned. A night bird called forlornly. A dirty white streak widened in the east. It was as if the universe stood still for a long while. Then day came peeping from beneath the petticoats of night as it gathered them reluctantly to depart.

And Little Ben knew then, knew what the scheme of the men below was. None of them were going to pay in blood to get him. They would wait till he was driven out to surrender, defeated and whipped by the sun that would scorch him out.

CHAPTER V

The Quality of Mercy

IT CAME, the sun, just a red stain through the boiling mist at first. The ruddy spot grew stronger. And after a little Ben had to narrow his eyes against it.

It was right after that he thought he would go mad. Two of the bunch came into the bowl from the south part of the canyon. They toted buckets from the hoeman's wagon. Water—cool, cool water—sloshed over the sides of the buckets. Men came out from cover to drink.

Little Ben had to bury his head from the sight. In a little while the back of his neck began to sting and he jerked his head up. It was the sun, a forerunner of what he could expect later.

Then hope sprang with a new idea. It seemed incredible he hadn't thought of it before. He dragged out a bandanna, waved it, and slowly got to his knees on the shelf. Men were looking up.

"Like I told yuh last night," he called hoarsely, "I'm *not* Swift Wagner." He waited for the jeers to die. "I'm Ben Dacey, deputy from Big Trigger. Yuh kill me, and yuh'll answer for it!"

The jeers and catcalls drowned him out again. Every word he made seemed to be scraping raw flesh from his throat.

"Yuh can prove it!" he went on. "Ask Diego Martin. I was at his place last night. He—h-he knows me."

"And who'll believe that lyin' little rat, Wagner?" somebody yelled back.

Cackles eddied from the canyon floor. But a couple of men moved up to the north end of the bowl where smoke curled from a campfire. They talked to somebody there and came back. One of them cupped hands to his mouth.

"Diego says he don't remember no Ben Dacey comin' to his place!" the man called.

Little Ben dropped, and wormed back into the cave. It would be nice to go to sleep and forget everything. To die that way. But the very thoughts prodded him awake. You hung on, danged doomed idiot that you were, to the bitter finish, hoping against hope.

The sun was higher now. Two hours or so had elapsed.

"How much longer—"

But he couldn't finish it. His throat was too dry, the vocal cords too taut. His clothes felt greasy, in the sweat leaking from every pore of his body. His head was very light. He realized that was fever. The wounded left forearm had already begun to swell.

He put up his right arm to shield his forehead from that hot eye in the east. A bullet ricocheted screamingly off the wall just above him.

"Mebbe it would be better to let 'em shoot me."

That thought ran in a singsong through his tortured brain. That way would be better than to come crawling out like a whipped animal and have them string him up.

A *cloppity-clop* sound pierced his consciousness. He inched up his head to see a rider come into the bowl from the south end of the canyon. Some of the pack gathered around the man's horse. The rider shifted and sunlight flashed off the badge pinned to his hickory shirt. A John Law!

Little Ben squirmed from the cave and stood reeling on the shelf. He waved and tried to yell. There was just one wide shot, then the lawman was spurring across the

[*Turn page*]

Will You Give—That They May Live?

AT this moment a quarter of the world's population is facing death from sheer starvation. The Emergency Food Collection, now under way throughout the United States on behalf of UNRRA, seeks contributions in the form of food in tin cans plus money with which to buy food. Every penny collected will be used to buy food. This is your opportunity to make a direct and personal contribution to help save lives of war victims overseas. Food will be distributed free, without discrimination. Food collection depots have been established in every local community. Checks and money orders may also be sent to national headquarters of the Emergency Food Collection, 100 Maiden Lane, New York 7, N. Y.

canyon floor toward him. Desperation gave Ben fresh strength.

"Howdy, Woody! W-woody Baer," he sobbed.

It was Woodman Baer, a U. S. Marshal he had met several times.

Then Baer was up in the stirrups, twisting around to lash the manhunters with his tongue.

"You pack of lowdown barroom bums! Pen them hoglegs. This is Ben Dacey, the Big Trigger deputy!"

* * * * *

Up the road paralleling the course of Straight Creek from Medicine Hill rode Little Ben Dacey. It was night again. He had been helped down from the shelf by some of the shamed manhunters, and taken back to the Hill. His wounds had been attended to. They had fed him. Some of the leading citizens had come around to apologize.

He'd had little to say. He had been thinking deep instead. And finally, after a few hours of shuteye, he had insisted on riding out.

Now, in the saddle of his claybank, he felt like a man returned from the dead. He was headed upcreek to Frank Widdows' store to take in Bull Joe Collis, but there was no fierce exultation now. It was simply his duty to bring in Bull Joe. He intended to do so, but he was still thoughtful as he rode through the thin rifling rain, slicker humped out over the left arm in its sling.

He had discovered what it felt like to be a hunted fugitive. And the memory would always be with him.

The rain was heavier when he rounded a bend and saw the faint lights of the general store at the branch of the creek. Dismounting, he checked his gun, then advanced slowly through the mud. He stuck his tongue out into the rain once. Never again in his life could he get too much water.

THE wet brush at the trailside slapped against his body as he edged up on the place. The shutter was drawn over the big front window and age-yellowed tattered shades covered the glass of the front doors, locked of course. An easy good-natured laugh came faintly from within as he crept up the steps. Then he got an eye glued opposite a small rent in the shade of one door.

There was a small bar in the back of Widdows' store. In front of it sat heavy-bodied, round-faced Bull Joe, a drink in his hand, wounded leg pushed out stiffly before him. His unshaven face was creased in a broad grin duplicated by that on the face of the sawed-off fat man behind the bar. That would be Frank Widdows. Widdows apparently had shaved off his big black mustache.

Ben Dacey thought how he could slash out the glass, then pump lead into Collis. Bull Joe's gun-belt and Colts lay on the head of a barrel a couple of yards away.

Little Ben's lips flattened. Then his gun barrel slashed left and right. Even as the shattered glass tinkled, he tore down the shade. And then his gun muzzle was bearing on the pair.

"Freeze, gents!" he snapped.

Bull Joe was up, jaw slack, propping himself against the bar on his good leg. The other man brought his hands up from behind the counter where he had dived them. Ben told him to come out and open the door, sent a slug into the wall behind his head when he hesitated.

The fat man came waddling out. His hands shook as he shot back the bolt and fumbled at the key.

Then Little Ben was inside quickly. It seemed almost too easy.

Big Bull Joe, a good forty pounds heavier than the raw-boned deputy, stood staring, his massive chest drum-tight against his ragged shirt with strain. Then he relaxed, with a soft unhurried whistle.

"Sweet Pete, Dacey! A feller come through with the news yuh was shot by mistake down in the Hill. And yuh're here. I'll be danged." Bull Joe shook his head slowly. His faded blue eyes had a weary look.

Little Ben motioned the other man over to the counter.

"Yuh want to come in peaceable, Joe, or do I start smokin'?"

Bull Joe hitched at his belt. Somehow he didn't seem like a man backed into a corner.

"Yuh know, Dacey, I never killed that teller."

Little Ben was about to say that was what every wanted man claimed, but something kept him silent.

"Let me make a proposition, Dacey," Bull Joe went on thoughtfully. His voice was tired too. "I know I'm due to hang. I ain't fool enough to come doublin' back this close to Big Trigger either—less'n there was a reason. There is. A woman."

"Go ahead," Ben said, voice without rancor or threat.

"She lives up in Charity Flats, Dacey," Bull Joe said slowly. "Promise to take me back by way of Charity Flats so's I can see her once again, and I'll come in with yuh without no trouble."

There was a tension in the store Little Ben couldn't savvy. Widdows kept his eyes locked hard on the deputy. And Bull Joe's proposition didn't make sense. Bull Joe was caught dead to rights. How could he make trouble? But Little Ben found himself nodding. There were things he had learned about a hunted man.

"All right, Joe," he said. "We go back through Charity Flats."

Bull Joe sighed and picked up his glass.

"Yuh got my word, Dacey. Come over and have a drink. Frank, Frank Widdows! Come on out. You heard. I don't want no more trouble. I'm plumb tired of runnin'. Come on out—and don't trigger, Frank."

A faded curtain in a doorway leading to the living quarters stirred. And roly-poly mustached Frank Widdows came out from behind it, grinning crookedly as he holstered a Colt.

"Howdy, Dacey, howdy." He nodded to Bull Joe. "If this is the way yuh want it, Joe—Dacey, meet my cousin, Charlie." He indicated the man without the mustache who was almost his double. "No hard feelin's, huh, Dacey?"

Little Ben saw now why it had seemed so easy. One slug slammed Bull Joe's way, and Ben himself would have been a candidate for Boot Hill.

"He'd have got me anyway, Frank," Bull Joe said. "Yuh could have blasted him, but there'd been no sense in both of us dyin'. And I'm plumb tired of runnin', plumb tired. Step over and have a drink, Dacey. You're one tough manhunter, mister."

"Don't call me that!" Little Ben said explosively. "Never!"

MINUTES later, they were stepping out the door for the ride back, by way of Charity Flats. Charlie Widdows had brought around Bull Joe's pony. Frank Widdows stood pumping Bull Joe's hand.

"Good luck at yore trial, Joe. I'll be prayin' as much as I know how. Mebbe yuh'll beat it."

Two riders came slapping up out of the rain from the direction of Medicine Hill. They didn't recognize either Little Ben or the prisoner as they pushed into the yellow light from the store.

"Hey, yuh hear the news?" one of them opened up. "Just come in back at the Hill. Ed Newbury, the gunman, died down at Edson after bein' tromped by a bad hoss!"

"Ed Newbury?" Bull Joe said, a curious hope in his voice.

"Shore. And before he cashed his chips, he confessed he shot that teller in the bank holdup at Sutter. And the confession is legal. The marshal at Sutter saw him sign it!"

Bull Joe and Little Ben Dacey were looking at each other, both grinning a little. Finally the deputy thumbed to the waiting ponies.

"Let's make tracks, Joe."

It was going to be a heap easier to take this man back now. There would be no hanging. And he understood why Bull Joe sat down on the wet steps and made laughing noises as he pawed at eyes that were not wet from rain.

Little Ben Dacey understood much now. He knew what it was to be hunted, to be threatened with death unjustly. And he never wanted to be known as a manhunter in his life. Never!

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

Healy smashed the glass and lunged through the window

A WADDY GOES TO TOWN

By JACKSON COLE

When Matt Healy carries a valuable pearl necklace, a gift for pretty Jane Jackson, bandits try to get plumb proddy!

THE clanging of the ranch cook's triangle was a weird sound coming out of the darkness just before dawn. Matt Healy opened his eyes, then yawned like a man will when he's just waking up. In the other bunks the waddies of the Circle J outfit stirred restlessly and grumbled.

The triangle was still ringing.

"It ain't time to rise and shine yet," protested a voice from one of the bunks. "Shucks, I just went to sleep a few minutes ago."

"That's Cookie's first call for breakfast," said another voice. "Soon as he starts shoutin', 'I'll throw it away,' we better shake a leg if we want to eat. He's a man of his word."

"I've wondered about that." Healy pushed back his blankets and swung his feet down over the edge of the bunk. "Suppose none of us was to show up, you figger Cookie really would make good his bluff?"

"I don't aim to find out," said Dan Garson. The foreman struck a match and lighted the oil lamp on the table in the center of the room. "I'm hungry."

The men dressed quickly and went out to the pump to wash. Matt Healy was one of the last to leave the bunkhouse. He took his time about fastening on his gunbelt and picking up his hat. He could hear Garson and the four other men splashing water and laughing outside. Joe Carter, a new hand, still lingered in the bunkhouse.

"Curious gent, ain't you?" Carter said.

"And kind of cautious, too, I gather."

Healy turned and stood staring at Carter. They were both big and husky and young enough to be edgy, like a couple of skittish horses. There was something in Carter's tone that Healy didn't like.

"Quit circlin'," Healy said sharply. "Come to the point."

"Been watchin' you the last few days," Carter said. "Notice yuh allers pick a hoss from yore string that's plumb gentle. If a feller is careful thataway there ain't much chance of him being shucked out of the saddle."

Matt Healy could have explained that a horse had thrown him a little less than a year ago and broken his left arm and right leg. They both had healed now, but until they were strong again, he couldn't afford to take chances. But he preferred not to explain anything to the sneering Carter. The boss was willing to admit Matt Healy was still a mighty good cowhand.

"Could be that yuh're cautious," Carter said, scowling at Healy. "Then again, mebbe yuh're just plain scared."

Healy masked his resentment and grinned at Carter with deceptive mildness.

"I'm the boss' favor-ite," Healy glibly explained. "That's why he won't let me ride nothin' but gentle hosses. Anything else yuh want to know?"

As he spoke, he looked at Carter level eyed. Carter hesitated, grew red, turned away and joined the rest of the outfit at the pump.

"Come and get it or I'll throw it away," shouted old Ed Lee, the ranch cook who everybody called "Doctor." "Don't make me say it more than twice!"

ALL of the men had finished washing. Now they headed for the cook shack. Healy figured there was no point in picking a fight with Joe Carter yet awhile, though the new hand sure acted like he was looking for trouble.

Up at the ranchhouse old Tom Jackson, who owned the Circle J was eating breakfast with his wife and daughter. The whole family were early risers as ranch folks generally are.

Soon after the time the men had finished eating and were out in the cavvy corral roping and saddling their horses for the day's work, the ranch owner came to the high railed fence with his daughter and stopped to watch. It was sunrise now. Streamers of red and gold overhead promised a clear, pleasant day.

Healy had saddled a pinto from his string. As he rode out one of the other men held the corral gate open and then closed it again after him. But Healy kept looking at Jane Jackson. He was thinking she was as bright and shining as a new red wagon.

She was tall, slender and blond, and very pretty. Also she was very romantic, though the outfit didn't know about that yet since this was her second day home after graduating from a finishing school.

"Oh, Matt," she said when she saw him. "You look like a knight of old on a fiery steed."

The Old Man snorted, and looked at his daughter. Then he grinned. Healy had been with the outfit for ten years, having joined the Circle J when he was a boy of fourteen. Now he was twenty-four, slim, lithe and good looking. He had practically grown up with Jane, who was twenty, and considered herself a woman of the world.

"Another year at that school back East and you shore would be finished, Jane," Healy said. "Knight on a fiery steed. Oh, sugar!"

"Told you Matt was smart, Jane," said Jackson, glancing at the waddy. "Want yuh to ride into town for me this mawnin', Matt. Aimed to tell you about it last night but I plumb forgot."

"Shore, Boss," Healy said. "Anything you say."

Jane drew away from them and walked over and talked to Joe Carter. There was an expression on Carter's face like he loved apple pie and somebody had just given him all he could eat.

Healy swung out of the saddle and held the horse by the reins as he talked to the ranch owner. Jackson looked at his daughter, saw that Jane was still talking to Carter, and then lowered his voice.

"Day after tomorrow is Jane's birthday," said Jackson. "I sent to New York for her present a few weeks ago. Figger it might have arrived at the post office in town so I want you to ride in and get it."

"All right." Matt nodded. "What sort of present is it, if yuh don't mind me askin', Boss."

"A genuine pearl necklace," said Jackson. "Cost me two thousand dollars."

"Two thousand dollars!" In his surprise Healy spoke loudly. "That's a lot of money."

"Shore is," agreed the ranch owner. "You

get the package and bring it out if it has come in the mail." Jackson frowned. "Don't tell anybody what yuh're carryin'. I want to make shore that Jane doesn't know what her birthday gift will be."

"Ain't any danger of me talkin'," said Healy. "Reckon I had better be headin' for town then."

He mounted and set off for the town five miles away. When he had gone a little distance he glanced back. Jane and her father were walking up toward the ranchhouse. The rest of the outfit were drifting out in the direction of the range to gather strays for the spring roundup. Healy saw that Carter on a dun horse was riding with the rest of the men.

It was hot now that the sun was higher in the sky and Healy held his pinto down to a fast walk. The horse was one of the gentle ones in his string, a good, well trained animal.

An hour later Healy neared the little cowtown called Festival. Ahead of him a rider on a big bay swung onto the road.

Healy recognized the bay before he did the rider. There was only one horse with three white stockings in this part of the country, far as the waddy knew. It was Ed Teller's bay.

Teller was topping the horse all right. He saw Healy coming and halted to wait for the waddy to reach him.

"Morning, Healy," Teller said, as Healy drew up along side of him. "Since yuh're goin' to town I'll ride along with yuh."

"Suits me," said Healy.

HE GOT to thinking that he had never liked Ed Teller much. The stocky, hard faced man had a small spread north of the Circle J and something about him just didn't inspire Healy with confidence. Besides Teller wasn't what could rightly be called a friendly soul.

As they rode on they chatted casually like men will when they don't have much in common. Just range country topics, such as the weather and the prospects of it being a good year for stock.

When they reach the single main street of the little town Teller headed for the Black Horse Saloon and Healy rode to the post office. He dismounted at the hitch rail in front of the building and tied his horse to the rail. Then he went into the post office which was just a section of the big general store that had been walled off.

Old Seth Adams, who was postmaster and also owner of the general store greeted Healy.

Mornin', Matt," said Adams. "Got an insured package for Tom Jackson. Come when the overland stage brought the early mail this morning. You want to take the package out to the ranch?"

"That's what the boss sent me in for, Seth," said Healy. He glanced out of the open door and was surprised to see Joe Carter halt his dun at the hitch rail in front of the saloon up the street. "I'll take that package along."

"Keno," said Adams, getting a small package that was carefully sealed. "Here she be. Since it's insured, you got to sign for it, Matt."

Healy signed and took the small package which contained the pearl necklace. It was about five inches long and about an inch or so wide. He thought a minute, then thrust the package into the top of his right boot and drew the button of his levis down so that the right pants leg hid the parcel.

"Good trick," said Adams as he watched. "Reckon no one would think of looking for it there even if he searched you." The postmaster frowned. "Do yuh figger you might run into trouble, Matt?"

"Never can tell," said Healy looking at a gunbelt and holster on the counter with a new .45 in it. "Nice looking gun and holster, Seth."

"Sell you the whole outfit cheap," said Adams. "Twenty dollars and it's yours."

"It's a deal if you throw in a box of cartridges," said Healy.

He bought the gun and holster and strapped it on. Now he was wearing two guns and looked right salty. He left the post office.

A thought struck him. He decided to find out what had brought Carter to town. Rightly the new hand should have been working out on the range.

Matt Healy walked up the street and entered the saloon. Carter and Teller stood at the bar talking. There were half empty glasses standing on the counter in front of them. There was no one else in the place but the bartender.

"Been waiting for you, Healy," said Carter in an angry tone as he saw the waddy. "Didn't like the way you talked to Miss Jackson this morning. I aim to teach you some manners."

"Don't act loco, Carter," said Healy.

"Miss Jackson and me are old friends. She didn't mind what I said to her about that school."

"I figger different," snarled Carter.

Healy noticed that Teller had moved away. Now he was standing so that he blocked the doorway of the saloon. Healy didn't like the looks of things.

Abruptly Carter leaped forward and smashed a fist into Healy's face. Before he could recover from the blow, Carter drew his gun and slashed the waddy's head with the gun barrel. Blood ran down Healy's cheek.

"Don't let him get away," shouted Teller from the door. "He's got the two thousand dollars and we want that money."

Healy grabbed for his guns, and then he realized that he had not loaded the new gun which he just bought. He was almost certain that his old Colt also was empty. He had done some shooting at a target the previous evening and forgotten to reload it.

"I'll get him!" shouted Teller as he drew his guns.

"Careful, Teller," snapped Carter. "Don't shoot yet. We want him alive until we get the money."

THE bartender had ducked down and was hiding behind the bar. Suddenly Healy whirled and headed straight for a closed window at one end of the bar. He smashed the glass with the gun in his right hand and then lunged through, landing outside in an alley beside the saloon. Inside Teller's guns roared and the bullets whined above Healy's head. He ducked down just in time.

He glanced out into the street. Men of the town were running toward the saloon, attracted by the sound of the shots.

He raced back down the alley just before Teller appeared at the broken window, guns in hand. Healy slipped out of sight behind the building, swiftly loaded his guns and thrust them into the holsters. He heard voices and knew that men were gathering in the saloon. One of them was Sheriff Norton.

He walked through the alley again, out onto the street and entered the saloon. Carter saw him as he stepped in.

"There he is!" shouted Carter. "Just like I told you Healy held up the saloon, took our money and then jumped out the window."

"That's right," said Teller. "He robbed me of two thousand dollars in cash. Bet he still has the money on him."

"Quiet, all of you," roared Sheriff Norton. "Let's get the right of this."

"I haven't any two thousand dollars, Sheriff," said Healy as he stepped forward, glaring at Carter and Teller. "These two sneaking sidewinders are lying."

"Search him, Sheriff," snapped Carter.

"Go ahead," said Healy. "I'm willin'."

The sheriff quickly searched the waddy and found nothing but ten dollars in cash. Carter and Teller looked disappointed.

"He must have hid it somewhere," said Teller without thinking. "We know he got that money from the post office."

"Post office?" Norton swung around and glared at Teller. "You just said he got the money from you."

"They've both been lyin'," said Matt Healy. "I'll tell yuh just what happened, Sheriff. This mornin', out at the Circle J, the boss told me he wanted me to go to town. Carter heard me say that two thousand dollars was a lot of money and figgered that was what Jackson had sent me to town to get."

"Go on," said the sheriff as Healy paused.

"I rode into town and Carter followed me, figgerin' on grabbin' that money. He wasn't too popular with our outfit so I reckon he was aimin' to quit the job anyway. In town he must have met Teller and told him about the money. So when I came into the saloon the two of them picked a fight with me. They were goin' to knock me out and rob me."

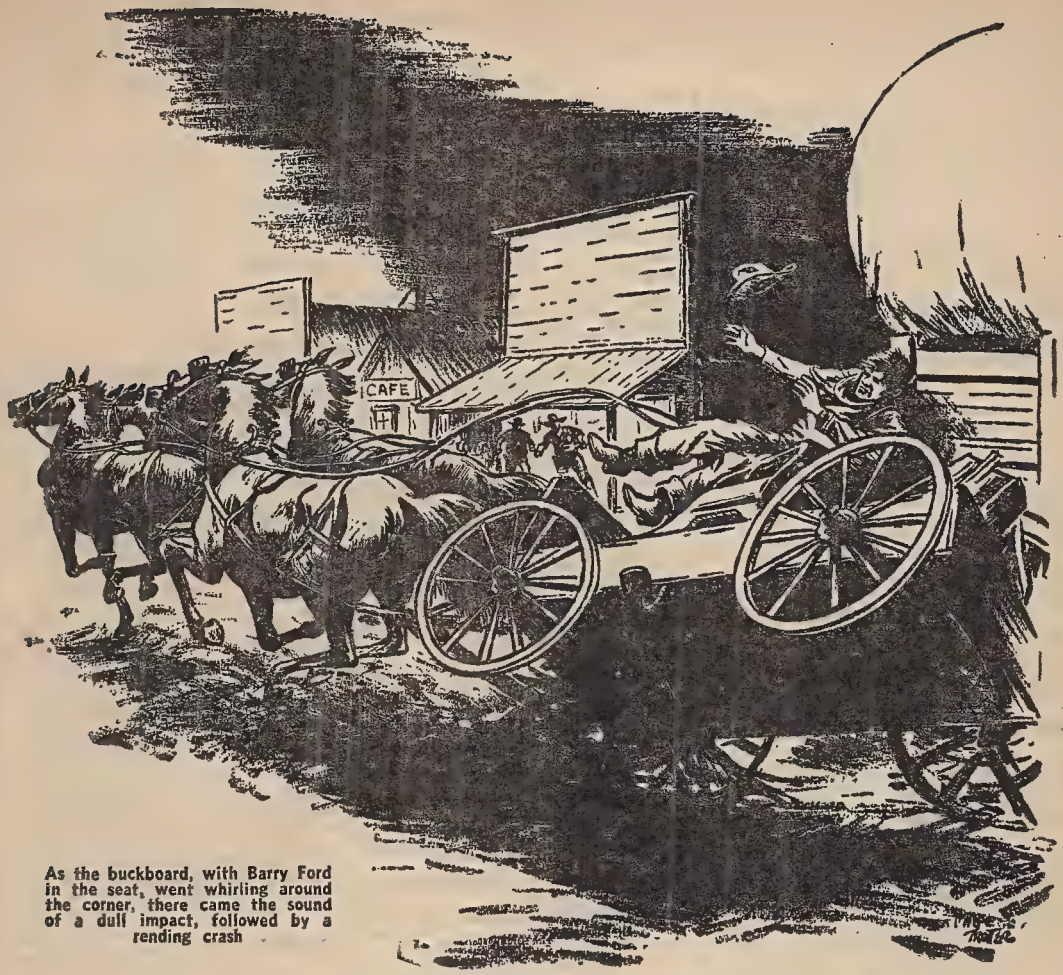
"That ain't so!" shouted Carter. "I tell you that he robbed us."

"It was Carter who started the fight in here," said the bartender suddenly. "And I didn't see anybody get robbed. Healy is tellin' it straight."

Teller snarled and reached for his guns, Carter was also drawing his Colt. Healy's hands flashed down and his guns came up roaring. A bullet caught Teller in the right shoulder and he howled and reeled back. A second slug hit Carter in the arm and he lost interest in proceedings.

"They shore proved you were tellin' the truth by that gunplay, Healy," said Sheriff Norton. "But what was all the talk about the two thousand dollars?"

"That was the price of a birthday gift that Jackson bought for his daughter," said Healy. "He sent me to town to pick up the package from the post office. Carter and Teller thought I was gettin' cash." He smiled grimly at the two men who had tried to rob him. "That feller who talked about casting pearls before swine, shore knew his stuff."



As the buckboard, with Barry Ford in the seat, went whirling around the corner, there came the sound of a dull impact, followed by a rending crash

WAR GUNS

By MELVIN GABLE

Marshal Orin Galt breaks into a desperate gun-running puzzle which can only be solved in flaming range battle!

FROM the top of the rise overlooking Llano Valley, Marshal Orin Galt and his lanky, red haired deputy, Shad Crane, watched the wagon train roll slowly along the rutted trail.

There were six wagons in all. They lumbered forward amidst a swirling cloud of alkali dust. The Winchesters in the hands of the guards riding alongside glinted dully in the fading rays of the setting Missouri sun.

"You'd think Cleve Maroon was hauling gold in from Kansas instead of hardware," Shad Crane commented sardonically, as he counted the number of guards.

"More than likely there's a load of shiny new repeating rifles hidden somewhere in those wagons," Galt said, hunching forward in his saddle.

His lean face, swarthy from continual exposure to the rangeland sun, took on a thoughtful expression.

He had long suspected Cleve Maroon of smuggling guns across the state line. Missouri was in a turbulent, chaotic condition with Quantrell and his guerrillas writing a bloody, dark chapter in the history of the West. New repeating rifles were at a premium. There was a fortune to be made for the man who could supply Quantrell's ever increasing legion.

It was a dangerous job with a stiff prison sentence as the penalty if caught. But Maroon was a ruthless, ambitious man who was used to taking long chances if there was enough profit involved. It was Galt's hunch that his freighting outfit was merely a cover-up for the real business of running in the guns.

The lead wagon was passing directly below them when Galt gave the signal to move down on the train. In the gathering twilight, amidst the clumps of leafy cottonwoods that dotted the slope, their approach was well shielded from below.

As they emerged from cover, coming abreast of the wagons on the narrow trail, Galt drew his Bisbee Colt and fired a warning shot into the air.

"Pull up!" he shouted.

The drivers, startled by his sudden appearance, braked their teams to a sharp halt. One of the mounted guards started to bring his Winchester up to his shoulder. Galt spurred his roan over to him, leveling the Colt in a menacing gesture.

"Drop it quick, hombre, there'll be no gunplay. Where's Cleve Maroon?"

"What the devil's going on here?" a heavy voice demanded.

A TALL, powerfully built man astride a black bay cantered up alongside of them, brandishing a long barreled Dragoon pistol. Upon recognizing Galt, he slid it into the ornate hand holster at his side.

"What's the meaning of this horseplay, Galt? You had me thinking we'd run into a band of road agents." His pale blue eyes flashed fire.

"I rode out from Platte City to meet you on the trail, Maroon. I aim to check your wagons for contraband guns." He met the big man's flashing gaze unwaveringly.

"You'll be wasting your time," Maroon answered harshly. "There's nothing in my wagons except the usual load of supplies."

"Go to it, Shad," Galt directed. He looked across at Maroon again. "Tell your men not to interfere with him. If there's any trouble, you get my first bullet."

Maroon twisted his heavy frame sideways in the saddle. "All right, men. Put up your guns. Do as he says."

Shad Crane's lanky figure eased out of the saddle. He clambered nimbly up beside the driver of the lead wagon and disappeared beneath the weather beaten white canopy. They could hear him moving around inside. Several minutes later he poked his head out.

"All clear in here, Marshal."

He set his left hand against one of the large water barrels lashed firmly to the wagon's side, and swung down to the ground, heading for the next vehicle in line.

"I told you there were no guns in the wagons," Maroon said arrogantly. "And don't think I'll forget this incident, Galt."

A shout from Shad Crane caused them both to look around. Shad walked swiftly towards them, herding a young man in front of him at the point of a gun. Galt's face paled slightly at sight of the prisoner's face.

"Barry," he murmured, swinging down from his saddle.

"I found him holed up in the second wagon," Shad said. "I reckon he didn't want to be spotted."

"All right, Shad, finish searching the rest of the wagons," Galt directed. He faced the prisoner stiffly, a cold light flickering in the depths of his slate gray eyes.

"Howdy, Orin," the young man said with a grin. "I reckon you weren't expecting to see your old friend, Barry Ford, so soon again. Don't look glum. I tried to keep out of sight but your deputy spotted me. I hadn't meant for you to find me."

"What are you doing back in Missouri," Galt asked coldly. "When you left Platte City last year, you gave me your word you'd stay clear of there."

Barry Ford shrugged. "Abilene got pretty dull. I threw in with Cleve Maroon. He and I are partners in the freighting business now."

Cleve Maroon's sensual lips parted in an amused smile, as if he was greatly enjoying the scene.

"That's right Galt. I reckon it's safe for Barry to return to Platte City now. It's over a year since he got into that shooting scrape there."

"I'll keep my nose clean this time. I had to come back, Orin. Missouri's wide open now. There's a fortune to be made for anyone with plenty of sand and imagination. I aim to cut myself in on some of it."

Galt eyed Barry with something akin to exasperation. He hadn't changed much. In stature Barry Ford was a few inches shorter than Galt's six feet. He had a cleft chin and high cheekbones. His wavy, corn colored hair seemed a little darker shade than it used to be.

They had grown up together, these two, being as close friends as two men could be, working for the same cattle outfit until Galt had accepted the office of marshal. As far back as Galt could recall, Barry had managed to get into one scrape after another, culminating in a gunfight, after which he had fled from town.

Barry laughed. "Don't look so much like a stone faced judge. So help me Orin, I'm through making trouble. I give you my word."

"I hope for your sake that you mean it this time," Galt replied without any particular warmth. "Climb up on my roan and we'll ride into town together."

"Take one of our horses," Maroon said. "I'll meet you in town later, Barry." He glanced at the marshal. "Well, Galt, can I start my wagons rolling again?" he demanded. Shad Crane had returned from his check-up and reported that the wagons were as "clean as a whistle."

"Sure, Maroon," Galt agreed reluctantly. "Start them rolling."

MAROON boomed out the order to start moving. A blacksnake whip cracked through the air and the lead team started forward, stirring up a thin haze of dust. Barry borrowed one of the guard's horses and joined Galt. They left the wagon trail, cutting off through the hills.

Shad Crane fell in alongside them, whistling a few bars of "Get Along Little Dogie," while he rolled himself a quirly.

"So you threw in with Cleve Maroon," Galt said at length, eying Barry speculatively.

"You sound as if you didn't like the idea, but then nothing I ever did pleased you," Barry complained.

"You wouldn't know anything about his smuggling in guns for Quantrell's guerrillas, would you?"

"You didn't find any in his wagons did you?" Barry countered. "I reckon that should convince you you're all wrong about Cleve Maroon."

"Mebbeso," Galt grunted. "If I ever find out differently, I'm going to nail him pronto. The same goes for you, friend or not."

"Seen anything of Tod Gantry lately?" Barry asked, changing the subject.

"He's still the town blacksmith. When you pulled out after killing his cousin in that shooting scrape, he swore he'd get you if you ever showed up in Platte City again."

Barry laughed derisively. "Tod Gantry makes a better blacksmith than he does a gunhawk. I don't reckon he'll bother me any."

They rode on in silence until the lights of Platte City appeared in the distance. Barry declined Galt's offer to stay with him, deciding to stop at the Royal Hotel instead. They left him in front of the Royal and headed up the bustling street towards Galt's office.

Shad rolled another quirly and gazed contentedly at the rings of smoke he exhaled, but Galt had grown thoughtful.

"I've been doing a heap of thinking about Maroon's wagons," Galt commented idly.

"What about them?"

"Well, Shad, you searched every one of them from top to bottom. There wasn't the slightest trace of any guns. As I recollect now, there was one spot we clean missed."

Shad Crane regarded Galt thoughtfully. "What was that?"

"The water barrels."

"Have you gone loco? Water would ruin them."

"Not if there wasn't any water in them. I remember now. The staves weren't wet, or even damp as they should have been if there was water in the barrel. I didn't think anything of it then."

Shad Crane scowled. "Now that you mention it, two barrels lashed on either side of each of the six wagons are too many. It's too short a trip for Maroon to need that much water."

"Just what I was thinking," Galt said. "Them guns could have been broken down and stored inside." He sighed with regret. "It's too late to do anything about it now. They've reached Maroon's freight yards and are unloaded by this time."

Shad scowled. "I think I'll mosey around there and see if I can turn up anything," he

said. "See you later, Marshal."

He turned off at the next side street, leaving Galt to ride on to his office by himself. Marshal stayed there only long enough to clear up a little detail work, then went across to Ming Loo's for supper. He ate in leisurely fashion, although Barry's reappearance still worried him.

He was halfway through the meal when Ben Peabody, the local editor, came bursting in. He seized Galt by the arm, half dragging him out of his chair.

"I've been looking all over town for you, Marshal. They just found Shad Crane in the alley behind Shannon's saloon."

A cold chill gripped Galt. "Is he hurt bad?" He sensed the answer before Peabody gave it.

"He's dead. Someone put a couple of slugs in his back."

Galt's face went grim as he pushed away from the table. He was aware of none of the raucous laughter or bawdy strains of music floating out of the gambling halls as he hurried up Front street with Ben Peabody half running at his side to keep up with him.

A crowd had collected at the mouth of the alley by the time he reached it. Their subdued whispering ceased as he edged through them. In the dim radiance of a lantern which someone had propped up on an overturned barrel, Shad Crane's inert figure seemed lankier than ever sprawled out on the ground.

GALT knelt beside him as Doc Sharpe, the coroner, gently placed a handkerchief over Shad's face. Doc Sharpe shook his bald head sadly.

"He didn't have a chance, poor devil. See? His gun's still in the holster."

"Did anyone hear or see the shooting?" Galt asked huskily.

"Nobody. One of Shannon's barkeeps found him there when he came out for a smoke."

"Have a couple of the boys take him over to your office, Doc," Galt said, rising.

He scanned the faces of the crowd which had pressed closer. Cleve Maroon had shouldered his way to the front and stood looking at him impassively.

"You wouldn't know anything about this, would you Maroon?" Galt challenged.

"I just came from the Royal Hotel where I've been for the last half hour, talking business with your friend, Barry Ford," Maroon said flatly, hooking his thumbs on the edges of his waistcoat. "Any further questions, Marshal?"

Galt started to say something, but changed his mind. He turned away abruptly. The crowd melted back giving him room to pass through. He headed directly for his office. As he was about to enter, a furtive scraping sound from the shadows at the edge of the dobe building drew him up short.

"Who's there," he barked, straining his eyes into the blackness.

One of the shadows took on life as a man's figure bolted towards the street. Galt whipped out his Colt and took the three front steps in one swift bound. Halfway across the street the fleeing figure tripped in a wagon rut and fell heavily to his knees. Agilely he twisted about, started to rise.

Galt was almost on him. He caught the swift glint of metal as a gun leaped into the man's hand. Galt lashed out savagely with his foot, bringing it sharply against the other's wrist. There was a grunt of pain and the weapon thudded to the ground several feet away.

With his left hand Galt gripped the man's shirt front, jerking him roughly to his feet. With the other he dug the muzzle of his Colt into the midriff bringing an immediate end to his resistance.

"It's you, Tod Gantry," Galt said, recognizing the beefy, florid face of the blacksmith.

Gantry stared sullenly at Galt, his breath coming in rapid, labored gasps.

"I haven't done anything," he whined.

"What's the idea of waiting around my office, then running off like you did when I spotted you? Go on, talk."

Gantry sensed the rage Galt was in. He swallowed hard.

"Someone told me they saw Barry Ford ride into town a short time ago. I ain't forgotten that I swore I'd get him if he ever showed his face around here again."

Galt released his grip on Gantry's shirt. "So that's it. You thought he might show up at my office and decided to lay for him there."

Gantry nodded his head slowly.

"Someone shot Shad Crane a while back. Know anything about that?" Galt queried sharply.

"Crane killed?" The blacksmith's beefy face registered genuine surprise. "This is the first I heard about it—that's the truth."

"Listen Gantry. I could lock you up for

this if I wanted. Take my warning and forget about gunning Barry. He killed your cousin in a fair fight. Sabe?"

Gantry regarded him with the same sullen stare but made no comment.

"Now drift, and remember what I told you."

Gantry turned away. He retrieved his gun, rubbing it against his thigh to brush off the dirt, and went on without bothering to look back. Galt changed his mind about reentering his office. Shad Crane's death was still uppermost in his mind. When Shad had left him earlier, it had been for the purpose of taking a look around Maroon's freight yard.

There was no doubt in Galt's mind but what Cleve Maroon was responsible for Shad being shot. That could mean only that Shad Crane had found out too much. Galt was sobered somewhat by the thought that Barry was equally responsible, as Maroon's partner. Inwardly he had always known someday Barry would get into a scrape too serious to wriggle out of. He had hoped, when he left for Abilene, he might change. He realized now Barry Ford would always remain the same.

THE thought crossed his mind that perhaps Barry did not know that Maroon actually was engaged in smuggling guns. He quickly dismissed this notion. Barry must have known only too well what was going on. That's what he had meant by saying Missouri was wide open and ripe for the picking.

The answer to it all lay in Maroon's freight yard. Perhaps there he might pick up the trail where Shad Crane had left off.

* * * * *

A high, wooden plank fence completely surrounded Maroon's freight yard, which was situated at the north end of Front street. Galt circled around to the rear. There it was devoid of any street lanterns, and bordered by an empty field. He gained access by propping a wooden box against the fence and clambering over.

He dropped cat-like to the ground and remained crouched low until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. It was equally dark within the enclosure. To his left loomed the bulky outlines of a dozen or so wagons.

Several piles of stacked crates filled the area to his right, beyond which was the wooden frame office. A lantern suspended from the eaves over the entrance provided the only light throughout the yard. Night bugs flitted rapidly around its dim glow.

Galt moved stealthily over to the nearest wagon. The water casks which had previously been lashed to its side now rested on the ground. He moved his hand slowly across the rough surface of the staves. It was completely dry.

Cautiously he tipped it over, lowering it gently until it was lying on its side. He struck a match, cupping his hand to shield the flare from being visible to anyone who might be in the office. Kneeling, he extended his hand into the empty barrel. Wisps of straw clung to the sides. More was strewn on the bottom. Undoubtedly it had been filled with straw to keep the guns from rattling against the sides while in transit.

Abruptly he blew out the match and straightened up. Footsteps grated against the gravel. A man was approaching. Possibly someone had perceived the flare of his match after all. He braced himself against the side of the wagon, well concealed within its shadows. His fingers closed firmly over the stock of his Colt as the outlines of the man materialized at the rear of the wagon.

Slipping a coin from his pocket, Galt flipped it against the side of the next wagon. Startled, the man spun about. Galt stepped forward quickly, prodding him in the ribs with the muzzle of his Colt.

"Up with 'em," he rasped. "Don't make a sound."

The man froze in his tracks, extending his arms skyward. Galt listened attentively to assure himself no one else was around. Except for the steady chirping of crickets, all was quiet. He stepped around in front of his prisoner. It was the driver of the lead wagon in the train he had stopped on the trail.

His eyes widened in fear when he saw Galt.

"Don't be blamin' me, Marshal," he said. "I didn't have a thing to do with it."

"Do with what?" Galt snapped.

"With killing Shad Crane. Cleve Maroon and Barry Ford spotted him prowlin' around here. Maroon shot him and they dragged him out of here. So help me, I didn't have a hand in it."

"Where are the rifles you ran in tonight?" Galt asked him.

"They're crated in a buckboard. Barry Ford is goin' to drive them to Silver Springs

later tonight. One of Quantrell's agents will be waitin' there fer them."

"Where's Barry now?"

"Over at the Longhorn Bar," the driver said anxiously, hopeful that his information might tend to make Galt deal easier with him. "He won't be leavin' fer Silver Springs fer about an hour yet."

Galt's slate gray eyes flickered coldly. "I want you to take a message to Cleve Maroon for me. Tell him I'll be waiting at the Longhorn to settle up for Shad Crane. Sabe usted?"

"Shore, shore. I'll tell him jest like you said."

The moment he left, Galt struck out for the Longhorn. He walked up Front street in a steady deliberate stride, his lean face set in grim, uncompromising lines. This would be the pay-off not only for Maroon, but for Barry as well. It would not be easy for him to bring Barry to the end of his rope. But that was the way it had to be. Shad Crane had not backed down from doing his job. Neither could he.

"Marshal—Marshal!" It was Ben Peabody, hatless and very much out of breath. "Tod Gantry just went into the Longhorn gunning fer yore friend, Ford."

EVEN as he spoke, a swift exchange of shots broke out from down the street.

Galt quickened his pace to a run, weaving in and out of groups of startled townsfolk who stopped short on the plank walk. He burst through the Longhorn's bat-wing doors to see Tod Gantry sagging against the end of the bar. The barkeep, raising his head cautiously from beneath the bar, was the only other occupant. There was no sign of Barry.

Gantry's gun lay on the bar in front of him next to a half emptied whisky bottle. He turned slowly as Galt entered, exposing the front of his checkered shirt which was streaked with blood just below the right shoulder. He lifted a whisky glass in fingers that shook visibly. Some of it spilled before it reached his lips.

"See what I get fer not taking yore advice, Marshal," he said with an effort. "I reckon Barry was a mite too fast on the draw. My bullet didn't even touch him."

"Are you hurt bad?"

"I'll live. Someone went to fetch Doc Sharpe. This whisky will keep me going till he gets here."

[*Turn page*]

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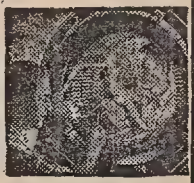

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"Where's Barry?"

"In the back office." Gantry jerked his head towards the door facing the opposite end of the bar.

Galt crossed the room swiftly. The door was unlocked. He swung it open, kicking it shut behind him. It was a small, stuffy room, with one fly specked window. Barry sat in the center of the room, one hand hidden from view beneath the edge of the table.

His blond hair was combed flat against his scalp, and his smooth face freshly shaven. He smiled genially.

"I was expecting you'd show up, Orin. Heard all about your little visit to Maroon's freight yard. I understand you found what you were looking for."

"Then you know why I'm here," Galt lipped, taking a step forward.

Barry's hand whipped up from beneath the table holding a small but efficient derringer. The smile still played about his face but a hard glint came into his eye.

"That's far enough."

Galt grew tense. He raised his hands slowly, giving Barry a cold, calculating glance.

"You're through telling me what to do," Barry said, getting to his feet. "From now on I do as I please. It might interest you to know that I've been Maroon's silent partner for some time now. I supplied the guns, he ran them over for Quantrell. The rifles you were so anxious to get are in a buckboard in the alley."

"I heard you were taking them to Silver Springs tonight."

"Right. Now here's another little surprise. I won't be coming back. You see, I'm joining up with Quantrell. That's where the real money is."

His eyes were wide with excitement. "I'll make a name for myself in Missouri before I'm through. You just wait!"

"If you intend to shoot me, get it over with," Galt said.

"Shoot you?" Barry's face took on an expression of mock abhorrence. "How would it be for a man to kill his best friend. No, I've a much better way, Orin."

He circled swiftly to the door anl edged it open, not taking his glance off Galt for more than a second at a time.

"Cleve Maroon just came in. I've a hunch he doesn't like you, Orin. I'm going to send you out to meet him. Sorry I can't stay to watch the fun, but I have to get started for Silver Springs."

He motioned with his gun for Galt to move towards the door. As the marshal drew abreast of him he deftly removed the Colt from Galt's holster.

Galt stiffened. "You wouldn't send me out to face Maroon without a gun, would you?"

"Why not? I've got too much at stake to risk having you upset the applecart now. All right. Start moving."

Galt no sooner stepped over the threshold when the door slammed behind him. Cleve Maroon was standing parallel to the center of the bar. The moment he spotted Galt he whipped aside the folds of his broadcloth coat and drew. Galt's hands were still raised above his head. He stood by the end of the bar as if rooted to the spot.

"I'm not packing a gun, Maroon," he said levelly.

MAROON held his fire, his sensual lips parting in a wolfish grin.

"Now that was downright negligent of you not to wear your gun. I knew a marshal who did the very same thing once. It cost him his life."

A cold chill gripped Galt. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the frightened barkeep dodge for cover again. At the opposite end of the bar, several feet behind Maroon, Tod Gantry still waited for Doc Sharpe to arrive.

"You made a plumb bad mistake by meddling into my affairs," Maroon said with a scowl. "Now it's your turn to get the same as Shad Crane."

Looking beyond Maroon, Galt saw Gantry's fingers close about the barrel of his gun which was still lying atop the bar. Galt's face remained impassive as he watched Gantry's hand draw back.

With what must have taken every ounce of strength he had left, Gantry shot his hand forward, sending the gun scudding down the length of the bar. It sailed past Maroon, riding the bar's polished surface like a toy engine on a rail.

"Make yore play, Marshal!" Gantry gasped.

At the first sound of metal rasping against the wood, Maroon wheeled, sending a shot wildly in Gantry's direction. It missed its mark, shatting the large plate glass mirror. Too late Maroon realized his mistake and whirled to face Galt again.

Galt lunged forward, scooping up the weapon as Maroon cut loose at him. Maroon was in too much haste to take aim. One bullet tugged at Galt's sleeve. Then Galt

returned the fire, coolly. Maroon doubled up like a balloon with the air let out of it. Desperately he tried to straighten up. Galt thumbed another sure shot. This time Maroon's heavy figure went down to his knees. Gradually he slumped forward.

"Thanks, Gantry," Galt called, before dashing back into the rear office.

It was empty, but the open window indicated the way used by Barry to make his exit. He threw a leg over the sill and dropped down onto the gravel littered alley. There came a sudden sound of galloping horses. Galt flattened against the side of the building as a buckboard drawn by a team of four horses flashed past, barely missing him.

Galt's lips compressed grimly. He fired three shots then the hammer clicked against an empty cylinder. Orange patches of flame momentarily dispersed the blackness of the alley. As the buckboard thundered out of the alley, turning onto Front street he knew that none of his shots had hit.

He caught a fleeting glimpse of Barry hunched in the driver's seat whipping up the horses before it disappeared from view. Almost immediately after there came a dull impact, followed by a rending crash. It was not a pretty sight that met his eyes when he reached the street.

The buckboard lay overturned in the center of the street, a broken mass of wood. Standing nearby was a large covered wagon which it had undoubtedly run into upon emerging from the alley. The wagon's only damage was a broken rear wheel.

Galt picked his way slowly amongst the debris of the wrecked buckboard. The crates containing the smuggled rifles had broken open and the guns lay strewn all around.

Barry Ford lay in the midst of the rubble, half a wheel and several rifles across his chest. The smoothness of his white face was marred by a deep red gash and his dishevelled blond hair was streaked with mud. He had undoubtedly died instantly.

Galt stared down at him in sombre silence. In a way he felt glad it had happened like this, without his having to take Barry Ford's life.

Here in Platte City Barry's dreams of glory and fortune had reached an abrupt end. The shipment of rifles destined for Quantrell's guerrillas would never be used to slaughter helpless men and women along the bloody Missouri-Kansas frontier. For that Galt was glad. Otherwise he felt suddenly weary as he turned away.

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

tends a windin' tunnel, horizontal, which sometimes ends in a room for the storage o' fodder, or the accommodation of the young prairie dog.

In the summer these little animals eat grass, alfalfa, and other plants, and store food for winter. They seem able to do without water, practically, mainly subsistin' on dew for their thirst.

A World o' Sunshine

I sort o' envy Wade and Jessie goin' to live in the old Chiricahuas. No prettier mountains anywhere, and a world o' sunshine!

They've got a way in that Southwest country o' sayin' "Salud y pesetas," meanin' "I wish you health and wealth," and that's jest what the whole durned lot o' us about the old Hitchin' Rail is sayin' to Wade and Jessie Small, betcha!

Sure, there was a time when it would've been plumb dangerous to go into that country to start a little spread, on account o' hostile Injuns.

The Chiricahua Apaches were fierce, cruel fighters, lemme tell you. None worse. Ain't no bloodier record wrote on the pages o' the Southwest's history than that made by the two powerful chiefs Cocheis and Geronimo.

They tortured and burned and scalped the white settlers and the troops o' Uncle Sam at every opportunity.

Bloody Battle

It's a historical fact, though, that this branch o' the Apaches, the Chiricahuas, was friendly to all whites 'til the brother o' Cocheis was wrongly accused, and killed while resistin' arrest.

Cocheis hisself had a contract with the company for furnishin' wood to the "Station" o' the Overland Mail, near Fort Bowie, and had been helpful and friendly to all. But when his brother was shot Cocheis demanded redress.

When he didn't get it, all hell broke loose in that desert country, and the bloody war lasted for years, costin' hundreds o' lives, and millions o' dollars.

The army officer who caused the arrest o' Cocheis' brother to be made, believed him guilty o' kidnapin' a little boy, the child o' an Irish father and a Mexican mother. The Mexican settlement demanded the child back.

Cocheis' brother and a band o' Injuns who were accused o' the theft o' the child denied any knowledge o' the incident, but they were not believed.

Time proved that their statement was a true one, for it has since been learned that the child was snatched away from the settlement by a band o' Pinal Apaches who'd had a drop too much o' mescal to drink. But the brother o' Cocheis was shot while resistin' arrest for the crime he had not committed.

Cocheis had been arrested, also, but he succeeded in cuttin' his way out o' the tent where he was confined, got his tribe together, and they went on the war path seekin' vengeance.

His rage at the injustice was great, and the Chiricahua Apaches fought with fierce hatred, usin' every cruel trick they knew, for years, against the white settlers and the blue-clad troopers o' the desert.

Geronimo on the Warpath

The famous Geronimo, best known Chiricahua Apache leader, was a mighty fighter, and he succeeded in drawin' practically all the tribes o' the Southwest into the fight against the whites.

He was sure a terror in the land. Finally, after years o' warfare, he was subdued, and the Indians were sent to old Fort Barrancas, Florida. There they were held prisoners for years, sickenin' and dyin' by the score in that climate so different from the high, clear climate o' their desert mountains.

After a while they were sent to a reservation that was set aside for 'em in New Mexico, and there their descendants live to this day.

The Lincoln Highway passes through their reservation, called "Mescalero." It's a pretty spot in the mountains, wooded, watered by small streams, fertile soil for their crops, and grass in abundance for their cattle and horses.

The little town, reservation headquarters, is built mostly o' frame houses, painted white, and nestlin' on top o' the mountain as it does, it's as pretty as a picture postcard. Lies about a hundred miles north o' El Paso, Texas.

The Apache Tribes

How does the Apache look? Well, there's many different tribes o' Apaches, and you can't classify 'em with a general description as to appearance.

Many o' the tribes o' the Southwest are scarcely above medium height, and they look to be still smaller from their great girth o' chest and width o' shoulders. Many others are tall, well-made, and straight as arrows.

One general rule may be laid down in describin' the Apaches, though. No matter which tribe they belong to, they're strongly

[*Turn page*]

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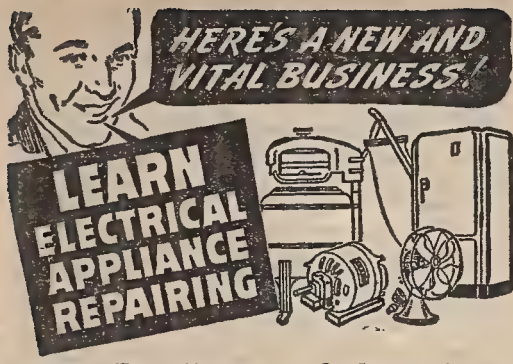

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Well, rannies and gals o' the Hitchin' Rail, *adios* 'til next month. Come a-gallopin' in with yore reins swingin' loose on yore bronc's mouth, and a grand song ringin' on yore lips and from yore hearts as well.

Buck Benson

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

YOUNG Mat Shellhorn had never been able "to ride proud" with other punchers. That's a Westernism, meaning that in the sageland of white-faced cattle and man-size saddles Mat had sprouted on the wrong side of the wagon trail. When he trotted his dusty pony into the town of Bannock Hole, this foster son of a suspected horse thief knew that he didn't belong in the fine society of forty-a-month waddies and cussin' teamsters.

Like many a good American kid born on the wrong side of the railroad tracks in the East, Mat Shellhorn felt the world ganging up on him. He wanted to pull his stakes and strike out for another frontier where his name wasn't an insult. It was either that or fight—and fight with bullet lead!

In the action-packed opening of TO RIDE IT PROUD, by Clee Woods, in the next big issue of THRILLING WESTERN, we find Mat Shellhorn walking into the Bannock Hole hardware store and saying to the proprietor:

"Gimme a .44 Colt, Jake. Traded my old hogleg off. Let me have a coupla boxes of cartridges, too."

He jingles two twenty-dollar gold pieces onto the counter as the merchant lets a cautious eye drift toward the front door where the so-called "better element" of town is gathered.

"Don't stall me out of a gun, Jake," Mat snaps. And in those words, Mat Shellhorn changes from a kid to a man. That fact is in his voice and in the authority he puts into the look he gives the hardware man, who reaches for a Frontier model Colt and puts it on the counter.

At that moment "Steamer" Ward stamps

through the front door, a hostile jingle in his big wagon-wheel spurs. He's a powerful man, sawlog size, and he wears a birthmark date across his forehead. Behind him are the little frozen-faced "Tick" Mayfield and his equally icy brother, Lyle. The other following four are plenty tough.

"Don't load that new hardware!" Steamer Ward's voice booms.

"If you've got any grudge against me, Ward," young Mat Shellhorn answers in his new-found manhood, "why don't yuh make it a square, stand-up fight between me an' yuh? Do you have to have half a dozen more Cougar Cats at yore back to tackle a lone man?"

That's fighting talk. And it makes a fighting featured novel for the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN. It's a powerfully emotional story dealing with the greatest element in the American character—pride! It reveals the great and rolling Westland at its worst and at its very best, where a man can win his spurs only through courage. It's the kind of story that every hombre in the country, whether born rich or poor, can take into his heart.

The battle that young Mat Shellhorn fights with Steamer Ward in the hardware store is but the fuse to a chain of explosive fights

[*Turn page*]

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running through TO RIDE IT PROUD. And the novel builds with smashing speed to a thrilling climax when Steamer Ward leads his gunmen to a raid on the Shellhorn horse herd on the banks of Blue Creek.

It is night and lightning splits the low-hanging sky. Thunder crashes. Rain pours down. The waters of the creek boil upward to the bank tops, where the seven hundred odd broncs are being guarded.

The first Mat Shellhorn knows of the raid is when he hears his foster father, "Horse" Shellhorn, give forth an angry snort. This is immediately followed by the bark of a Colt. It is pitch-dark at the moment, and the rain is driving sideways in sheets.

Mat starts walking his pony toward the talking gun. It cracks only twice, then everything is silent, except for the roar of the storm and the wild neigh of a stallion.

Mat shoves his own mount along until he is sure he has reached the spot from which Horse Shellhorn's gun had sent its blunt cry. There comes a brief flash of lightning. The story reads on:

Mat saw only the flat bottom of the outer ring of the horse herd maybe twenty yards to his left. As the blackness swooped back swiftly, he jerked his head further to the right. He was too late to see more than the barest outline of something that way; maybe horses, maybe men. But he sensed trouble in those numerous figures. He whirled his horse to face them, pushed a little nearer and waited, gun cocked and pointed.

It seemed that the lightning would never break forth again. Every second was a minute. His horse pranced; blew through its nostrils. Mat tried to keep him headed toward that potential peril lurking there so near, but he could not be sure he maintained the same direction. The wind was dashing rain first one way, then the other.

Light! Vivid and fleeting. It was a magnificent picture suddenly spread before his dilated eyes. There was old Horse Shellhorn crouched forward, with gun belching fire from near his breast. He was fanning his hammer, and how fast! And at a row of crouching men who formed an imperfect half circle before Mat. But Horse Shellhorn was at their backs. It had been impossible for him to see in the dark, yet he could not have gained a better position had he been given perfect vision.

"Take it, Cougar Cats!" Horse roared, his voice rivaling the crash of his guns and the boom of thunder which followed fast on the blaze.

Horse got in four shots, the last two coming after darkness swept back. Mat also fired, but not with the speed and deadliness of Horse Shellhorn, who had been set for the slaughter.

Mat's horse plunged and reared, nearly frantic with the storm of sky and guns.

As a contrast to this thundering action novel, our next issue features another howling Swap and Whopper novelet by Syl MacDowell, entitled LAND OF MILK AND

MONEY. They are a strange pair, these two rollicking cow punchers who have taken up a life of wandering ease and laziness.

Swap is undersized, with a round, simple face and trustful blue eyes that hide the shrewdness of a born horse trader. Whopper, tall and rattle-jointed, is a gloomy-looking range character with a great talent for lying. In the rough, tough lingo of the cow country, they are saddle bums.

They awaken one peaceful, purple dawn not knowing that before the day ends they will achieve great riches—and just as quickly have it taken from them. They'll be plunged into deadly danger, be battered and bloody, and in the end be saved by—of all things—a gnawed hunk of chewing tobacco!

Their terrifying adventures begin while Whopper is fishing provisions from a grubsack and sees something stir inside his sleeping bag.

"My socks an' stars!" he cries. "Wh-what's that?"

"Just a visitin' skunk, mebbe," Swap replies.

"In my sleepin' bag?" Whopper questions. "I hope not!"

Picking up a stick of firewood, Whopper pokes at the lump in his bag, and he leaps back in horror, for the poke brings forth a small, muffled wail. Swap and Whopper have mysteriously inherited a baby!

Milk is the next question. And when they see some mighty tough-looking gents bury a big shiny milk can beside the road, they creep up and investigate what's inside. They find a fortune in fresh green currency. Add stolen money to an unwanted infant, then sprinkle some police and a skinflint into the pot, and you have a pepper-hot stew.

LAND OF MILK AND MONEY is a sure winner for the grand Western sweepstakes of humorous cow country yarns!

To sober the hilariousness of the Swap and Whopper novelet, the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN will also contain a two-fisted novelet by Louis L'Amour entitled BARNEY TAKES A HAND. There's a girl in this tale to warm the hearts of the romantic readers—a slender girl with a boyish figure, a pert, impudent little nose above a friendly mouth, and lips that laugh with her eyes.

She's a girl worth fighting for, and when

[*Turn page*]

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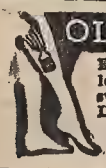

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BARNEY TAKES A HAND has the roar of a puncher crowd in its exciting chapters. And also the crash of guns. All in all, the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN is a blue-ribbon winner. So be on hand, pards. Backing up the featured novel and novelets you'll find plenty of fast short stories, interesting articles, and ye old HITCHING RAIL.

LETTERS FROM READERS

IT SHORE didn't take some readers long to climb aboard the band wagon when Bob Baker of Chicago wrote us a letter listing the stories he liked best and those he didn't cotton to at all. We couldn't have been more pleased over what happened.

Here's a sampling of some letters we've received from smart hombres who know a good thing when they see it and want to take a hand in running THRILLING WESTERN:

I want to tell you how much I enjoyed the last THRILLING WESTERN. This is my listing of the stories:

1. THE RANGER TERROR, by Bradford Scott—excellent—as Walt Slade is one of my favorites.

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2. PRAIRIE PILGRIM, by Cliff Walters—good.
3. GUNMAN'S JACKPOT, by T. W. Ford—very good.
4. DOWN TO BEANS, by Syl MacDowell—very funny.
5. WANTED—SMILEY JIM, by Chip Bennerton—grand.
6. Last but not least, A DOG'S LIFE by Allan K. Echols—grand.

I also like to read THE HITCHING RAIL by Buck Benson, and HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR WEST. So come on and give us some more good Walt Slade novels.—*Mrs. Opal M. Lonis, Cleveland, Tenn.*

I have just finished reading THRILLING WESTERN. In the feature LETTERS FROM READERS you asked the readers to write and tell you how they liked the book. Well, here goes:

THE RANGER TERROR, by Bradford Scott—wonderful.
GUNMAN'S JACKPOT, by T. W. Ford—good.
PRAIRIE PILGRIM, by Cliff Walters—good.
WANTED—SMILEY JIM, by Chip Bennerton—fine.
A DOG'S LIFE, by Allan K. Echols—interesting.
HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR WEST—also interesting.

I did not like DOWN TO BEANS, by Syl MacDoweil.

My favorite character is Walt Slade.—*Mary Ann Dunlap, Culver City, Cal.*

Will drop you a few lines to tell you how well I like THRILLING WESTERN. I really enjoy reading it because it is so thrilling.

The stories of El Halcon are my favorites. I wish you would publish him more often in THRILLING WESTERN. I also like Swap and Whopper.

I have read many nice letters from different fans, so I wish you would publish part of my letter next month. I will close now to finish my THRILLING WESTERN book.—*Curtiss Edward Moss, Reed, Ky.*

The best Western books, I think, are THRILLING WESTERN and MASKED RIDER WESTERN.

I think Swap and Whopper are very stupid, but I thought the story WANTED—SMILEY JIM, was very good. A DOG'S LIFE was very sad. I don't like that kind of a story since I have an Irish setter. GUNMAN'S JACKPOT was fair.—*David Potter, Wayland, Mass.*

I enjoy THRILLING WESTERN very much. I think that the best story you ever published is A DOG'S LIFE, by Allan K. Echols. THE RANGE TERROR, by Bradford Scott, was very good. GUNMAN'S JACKPOT by T. W. Ford, was good.

I have been reading this book for five years, and hope to continue doing so. It is one of the best books put out.—*Robert Fairbanks, U. S. Navy.*

These are the kind of letters we like—and we hope to continue receiving them from our readers! They certainly tell us what's what and enable us to pass the information on to our authors. The more letters, the better the magazine. So it's up to you, pardners!

Keep the mailman busy. And be sure you address all your letters and postcards to The Editor, THRILLING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. Thanks to everybody!

See you all next issue!

—THE EDITOR.

Answers to Questions on Page 35

1. A pair of aces and a pair of eights, which were four of the cards found in Wild Bill Hickok's hand after he was shot in the back and killed in a barroom in Deadwood, S. D. 2. William Bonney, who was taken west by his mother at the age of seven and in later life became known as Billy the Kid. 3. The representative of the ranch owner at the round-up. 4. Spanish word for round-up. 5. Judge Roy Bean named Langtry, Texas, after Lily Langtry, the famous actress.

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Now available "EXPERT" watches. Swiss made watches are known the world over for their accurate time-keeping and quality construction because they are made by master watch craftsmen. This handsome men's pocket watch has a sturdily-constructed chrome case and open figure dial. A timepiece you will be proud to own. SEND NO MONEY. Simply pay postman $8.50 plus 10% tax and postage. Wear 10 days on our money back if not satisfied guarantee.

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Hundreds of men and women between 18 and 50 make $10 to $20 in a single day giving Scientific Swedish Massage and Hydro-Therapy treatments. There is big demand from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums and clubs. Graduates earn large full time incomes from these or in private practice in their own offices. Others make good money from home treatments given in spare time. Learn this interesting, money-making profession in your own home, through our home study course. Same instructors as in our nationally known resident school. You can win independence and prepare for future security by qualifying for our Diploma. Course can be completed in 3 to 4 months. Many earn while they learn. Begin your training at once.

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WOULD YOU GAMBLE 3¢ TO WIN HAPPINESS?

THREE CENTS—the price of a postage stamp—is not much of a gamble, and the stakes are high!

If you are discontented, unhappy, not getting ahead . . . if you are worried about rising living costs and what you are going to do when the war is over . . . if you want to feel equal to other people mentally and financially . . . then you will want to know something about the easy to use principles of self-improvement taught by the Mayan Order. Many people who have used this secret system claim wonderful improvement in mind power. Some give credit to Mayan teachings for helping gain new love from wives or husbands. Many say that now, for the first time, they can face the future with confidence and without fear. Others tell of astonishing new health.

The Mayan Order is a secret brotherhood which bases its teachings on the traditional wisdom of the mysterious race of astrologers and temple builders, the ancient Mayans of Mexico and Central America. They deal with the problem of making PRAYERS work; how to use your subconscious mind, and thousands of other practical, helpful suggestions.

Rose Dawn, Official Scribe, The Mayan Order

Rose Dawn, brilliant radio personality known to millions, wants others to benefit from Mayanry as she has done!

If you are an average man or woman who is in a rut financially and mentally, the cost of a postage stamp may alter your whole life. All you are gambling is 3c—so you can't lose.

The Mayan Order will be glad to send a copy of their FREE book, Mayan Mysteries, which explains Mayan teachings. It tells of the surprising accomplishments of your own mind and how to put cosmic power on YOUR side. There is no obligation in mailing the coupon. You decide for yourself what to do after you read the FREE book, Mayan Mysteries. Don't just sit and wait and wish for a better life—DO SOMETHING. Mail coupon NOW.

THE MAYAN ORDER
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I want you to show me what the Mayan Order has actually done for others. Please send me your FREE book. This places me under no obligation whatever.

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What's My Job?—I Manufacture Weaklings into MEN!

Charles Atlas

Actual photograph of the man who holds the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

GIVE ME a skinny, pepless, second-rate body—and I'll cram it so full of handsome, bulging new muscle that your friends will grow bug-eyed! . . . I'll wake up that sleeping energy of yours and make it hum like a high-powered motor! Man, you'll feel and look different! You'll begin to LIVE!

Let Me Make YOU a NEW MAN —IN JUST 15 MINUTES A DAY!

You wouldn't believe it, but I myself used to be a 97-lb. weakling. Fellows called me "Skinny." Girls snickered and made fun of me behind my back. I was a flop. THEN I discovered my marvelous ne muscle-building system—"*Dynamic Tension*". And it turned me into such a **complete** specimen of MANHOOD that today I hold the title "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN."

That's how I traded in my "bag of bones" for a barrel of muscle! And I felt so much better, so much on top of the world in my big new, husky body, that I decided to devote my whole life to helping other fellows change themselves into "perfectly developed men."

What Is "Dynamic Tension"? How Does It Work?

When you look in the mirror and see a healthy, husky, strapping fellow smiling back at you—then you'll be astounded at how short a time it takes "*Dynamic Tension*" to GET RESULTS!

"*Dynamic Tension*" is the easy, NATURAL, method you can practice in the privacy of your own room—JUST 15 MINUTES EACH DAY—while your scrawny shoulder muscles begin to swell, ripple . . . those spindly arms and legs of your bulge . . . and your whole body starts to feel "alive," full of zip and go!

One Postage Stamp May Change Your Whole Life!

As I've pictured up above, I'm steadily building broad-shouldered dynamic MEN—day by day—the country over.

2,000,000 fellows, young and old, have already gambled a postage stamp to ask for my FREE book. They wanted to read and see for themselves how I'm building up scrawny bodies, and how I'm pacing down fat, flabby ones—how I'm turning them into breath-taking human dynamos of pure MANPOWER.

Take just a few seconds NOW to fill in and mail the coupon at right, and you will receive at once my FREE book—"Everlasting Health and Strength" that PROVES with actual snap-shots what "*Dynamic Tension*" has done for others—what it can do for YOU! Address: CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 47H, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

FREE

Mail the coupon below right now for my FREE illustrated book "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells all about "*Dynamic Tension*" methods. Crammed with pictures, facts! Address me personally: CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 47H, 115 E. 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

MAIL COUPON — NOW — FOR FREE BOOK

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I want the proof that your system of "*Dynamic Tension*" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

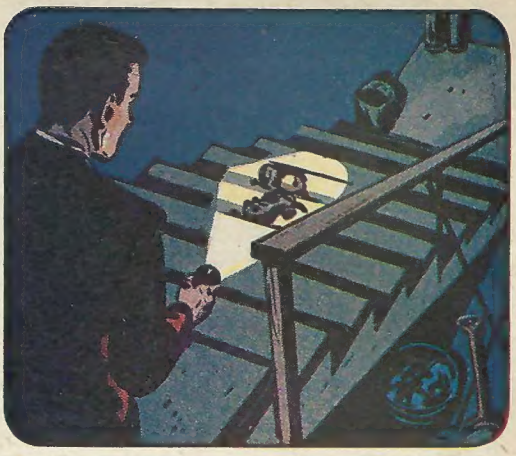
Address.....

City..... Zone No. (if any)..... State.....

☐ Check here if under 16 for Booklet A.

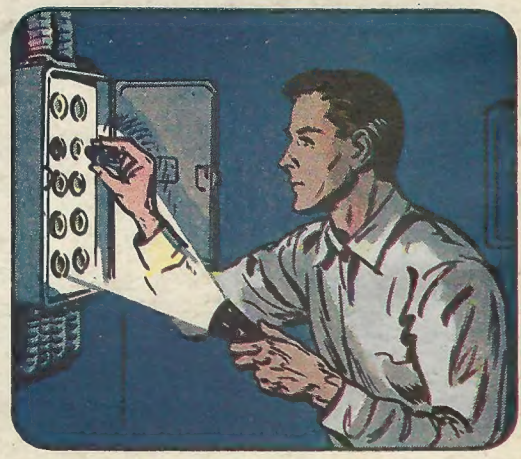
How to Avoid these "BOOBY TRAPS" in your home!

What you can't see CAN hurt you —says the National Safety Council



1 About 5,000,000 Americans are injured every year *at home*—33,500 fatally! Largest single cause: *falling.* A roller skate on a dark staircase; shin-catching obstructions: these can be lethal "booby traps." To avoid, carry your "Eveready" flashlight in dark areas.

2 Clear all obstacles away. Linoleum or carpeting should be tacked down firmly. In attic or basement, pack all loose objects in noninflammable boxes stored against the walls. Don't rely on *your* knowledge of where obstacles are located—the next person may not know.



3 Know *in advance* where your fuse box, main water and gas valves, etc., are located; be sure you have a clear path to them. Armed with your "Eveready" flashlight, you can approach without fumbling. Be sure loose wires are so placed that you won't trip over them.

4 Keep your "Eveready" flashlight always in the same convenient place—so you can readily locate it when needed. Keep it filled with "Eveready" batteries — they're again available.

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC.
30 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.
Unit of Union Carbide UCC *and Carbon Corporation*

The registered trade-mark "Eveready" distinguishes products of National Carbon Company, Inc.

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EXTRA POWER, EXTRA LIFE —AT NO EXTRA COST